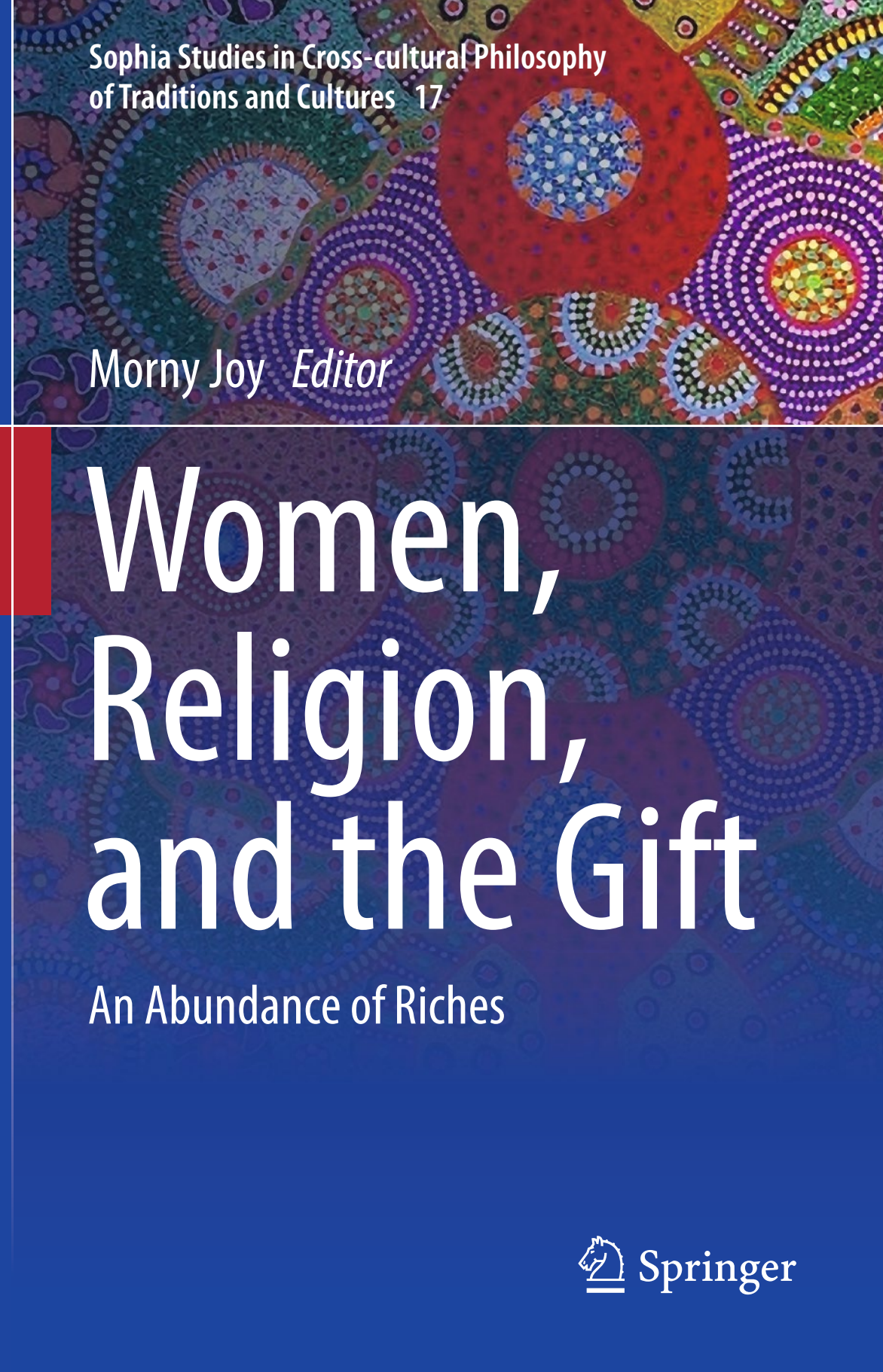




Sophia Studies in Cross-cultural Philosophy  
of Traditions and Cultures 17

Morny Joy *Editor*

# Women, Religion, and the Gift

An Abundance of Riches



Springer

# **Sophia Studies in Cross-cultural Philosophy of Traditions and Cultures**

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Morny Joy  
Editor

# Women, Religion, and the Gift

An Abundance of Riches

 Springer

*Editor*

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*This book is dedicated to the memory of two remarkable women:*

***Dr. Beatrice Medicine*** (1924–2006) and  
***Dr. Joan Ryan*** (1932–2005).

*The indefatigable work of these two scholars in support of the women of the First Nations in North America inspired the writing of this book.*

***Beatrice Medicine***, *Hinsha Waste Agli Win* (“Returns-Victorious-with-a-Red-Horse-Woman”), retired as a respected elder amongst her people, the *Sihásapa* (Blackfeet Sioux), a division of the Lakota people, in Standing Rock Reservation, Wakpala, South Dakota. The title of a volume of her collected writings, *Learning to Be an Anthropologist and Remaining “Native”* (University of Illinois Press, 2001), is an especially apt description of Bea’s life and work. She spent her career in multiple roles as an educator, expert witness, and consultant, constantly combating the existing stereotypes of Native Americans and witnessing to their lives and struggles, especially those of women. The CV, included at the conclusion of the above volume, attests to her extraordinarily active career. She received her Ph.D. from the

*University of Wisconsin–Madison in 1983. Prior to receiving this degree, and afterwards, she taught in a number of universities in the United States and Canada. Among her positions were those of Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology, California State University, Northridge (1982–1985); Professor, Department of Anthropology; and Director, Native Centre, University of Calgary (1985–1989). Among her many honours was the Malinowski Award, presented to her by the American Society for Applied Anthropology in 1996. A special honour was being the Sacred Pipe Woman at the Sun Dance at Sitting Bull's Camp in 1977.*

**Joan Ryan's** life was dedicated to urging Canada to acknowledge the rights of the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples. She became the first female head of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Calgary (1978–1983). She was also responsible for helping to found the Canadian Anthropology Society (CASCA) and its journal, *Anthropologica* (formerly *Culture*). After taking early retirement in 1987, Joan became affiliated with the Arctic Institute of North America (AINA) at the University of Calgary. It was then that Joan wrote her splendid tribute, *Doing Things the Right Way: Dene Traditional Justice in Lac La Martre, N.W.T.* (Arctic Institute and the University of Calgary Press, 1995). In recognition of her life of dedicated service, Joan was awarded the Prix Weaver-Tremblay Prize for exceptional contributions to Canadian Applied Anthropology, as well as the Chief David Crowchild Memorial Award of the City of Calgary.

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# Introduction

This volume on women, religion, and the gift is a study of the many ways women have made remarkable contributions to religious traditions in various eras and regions of the world. Unfortunately, these gifts have often suffered from neglect. All too often, they were unacknowledged, or attributed to men, and their remarkable contributions remained without approval, let alone praise. It is nevertheless fascinating that, in the last 35 years, there have been a number of books written about women and the gift, mainly by male scholars who provide analyses of the place or the role of women or the “feminine”, specifically in connection to gift-giving. In an earlier edited volume, entitled *Women and the Gift: Beyond the Given and the All-Giving* (Joy 2013a), I surveyed the work of such male theorists, among them are Derrida (1979, 1992) and Bataille (1985, 1987). In this book I also invited contemporary women scholars to assess these male views. My request was motivated by the fact that, in many of these works, women were either associated with a mode of generosity, i.e. the “all-giving,” or they featured as “the given,” i.e. given away, in a male economy where they were treated as commodities. This last category of “the given” is described in the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss. He observes that women constitute the supreme gift in that they are given away by male relatives in marriage to other males (Joy 2013a: 193–218). While Lévi-Strauss also describes this exchange as complying with the incest prohibition (1989: 124), he also justifies his description of the supreme gift, pronouncing that such an exchange of women cements social relationships, thereby establishing the basis of all exchange.<sup>1</sup> The other category, the “all-giving,” identifies women as extravagantly generous in their giving of themselves in the care of others – sometimes amounting to an extreme gesture of self-sacrifice. Within a religious orientation, such commitment has been further exploited and linked to a woman’s required compliance with rules of appropriate conduct that are declared as divinely ordered. Consequently, though the topic of women is addressed in both the above categories of “the given” and the “all-giving,” the thoughts and words of actual women are virtually absent. Women have very rarely been consulted on these matters and decisions. It is unfortunate, then, that the above allotment of tasks and roles does not grant women any independent

status. They are not recognized as decision-makers, donors, or even as partners of comparable worth in any activities featuring gift exchanges.<sup>2</sup>

The earlier collection of theoretical essays on the gift (2013a) that was mentioned above featured contemporary women scholars who offered responses, rebuttals, and alternative perspectives to these mainly philosophical and theological declarations. This present volume, in contrast, examines the topic of the gift in the context of the lived experience of women – a context where women are potential agents and are not necessarily hampered by definitions of prescribed behaviour. A number of the contributors to this volume will explore other distinctive appreciations of the gift. Their approaches differ, however, in that they avoid many of the constraints imposed by an exchange or profit model of economy. This permits them to examine many modes of gift-giving and receiving within a less controlled frame of reference. Such a more comprehensive approach can allow a dynamics of generosity and magnanimity that does not demand traditional forms of female self-renunciation.

The essays in this volume, as a stand-alone project, focus on the actual participation and contributions of women to a number of the religious traditions of the world. The contributors are women scholars who are passionately engaged in portraying significant facets of the gift in their relevant religious contexts. Each of these women scholars introduces an item or instance from a religious tradition that is part of her own research or personal experience. There is, however, one necessary qualification. This is the fact that such gifts – which I use in an open-ended and expansive sense – have often been dismissed or misunderstood. Such disregard could either have occurred during a woman's own lifetime or has been implemented at a later date by male scholars.

In this volume, then, women's gifts to religions have mainly been presented in an open-ended, even figurative, way, though there are also a number of chapters where gifts are dealt with in a more literal manner. Each essay provides a different perspective on the gift and its manifestations. The emphasis will not be on reclaimed lives of outstanding women such as Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), Marguerite Porete (d. 1310), or Sor Juana de la Cruz (1651–1695). Instead, this volume seeks to investigate specific elements of women's lives, including those aligned with the domestic or private domain, which have so often been relegated to insignificance. Several of the papers either explicitly or implicitly question unjust structures that have dictated women's inferior status in many religions. Others challenge what is considered as submissive female conduct. Unfortunately, it also needs to be acknowledged that many previous efforts to correct such inequities have rarely succeeded.

The gifts of women described in this volume all have spiritual and religious affiliations and implications in that their activities take place basically within a religious context. But the principal aim of this book is not to explain the religious reasons for the lack of acceptance of women's positive contributions or gifts. Nor is it to recommend solutions that can be applied to religious institutions and practices. My principal interest is to explore both positive and negative reactions, including indifference, as they figure as part of a dynamics of the gift as it has implications for

women's lives. The diversity of the topics, locations, historical periods, and actual religions do not lend themselves to any easy formulas or generalizations. The gift itself, in its many faceted variations, allows for fascinating explorations as to why some women have been denied respect and acknowledgement of their integrity, while others have received not only tolerance but occasionally acceptance. There are tales of desolation but also tales of inspiration. The essays in this volume thus raise a number of issues that dispute conventional platitudes. My hope is that they will generate creative tension and debate that, in turn, will encourage further in-depth research and insight. In this way, the volume is envisioned as making a substantial contribution to the complex study of women and their encounters with religions, both past and present.

I am only too well aware that I am writing these words at a time when the issue of "gender" is raising insistent and unprecedented questions in ways that far surpass previous contentious issues about sexual dimorphism and the binary divisions that subscribe to, or even dictate, separate "masculine" and "feminine" gendered attributes. Such traditional formulas can no longer decree the idealized roles that they once did, as religions come to terms with contemporary controversies raised by LGBTQ scholars and proponents of gay marriage. In light of these pressing demands, a question arises as to whether books such as this present volume remain relevant. I realize that this is indeed a serious challenge that requires circumspect reflection. My own response would be one that acknowledges and fully supports the compelling nature of the contemporary examination and realignment of sexual preferences/identities. This exercise will result in major, even momentous, changes in religions that are responsive to such claims. Yet, at the same time, it is good to remember that, for the greater part of world history, the position of women in most of the major traditions of the world has never been a decidedly advantageous one. Coincidentally, this present era marks a beginning of addressing the subjugated status of women in the majority of religions. I believe, however, that much crucial work still needs to be undertaken in many major areas in the study of religion. This investigation will encourage a more spacious awareness of what methods of analysis, e.g. intersectionality, queer theory, and other pluralistic approaches, will be most appropriate to be adopted.<sup>3</sup>

My own orientation, as a heterosexual woman, has mainly questioned received knowledge as to what constitutes "femininity". This has resulted in a number of books, e.g. *Divine Love: Luce Irigaray, Women, Gender and Religion* (Joy 2006) and *Religion in French Feminist Thought: Critical Perspectives* (2003), that are challenging of accepted precedents, principally stereotypes that affect definitions of both sex and gender. I appreciate that my LGBTQ colleagues are extending the range and possibilities of alternative gender identifications. This is a movement I warmly welcome. Yet vast quantities of relevant historical material remain to be excavated and examined regarding the nature of sex and gender practices and attitudes, specifically in relation to religion. This will require the radical rewriting of archives and records. For such a task, the combined insights of feminist, intersectional, and LGBTQ approaches and knowledge can all be constructively brought to bear on traditional heteronormative ideals. Such diverse orientations will revitalize,

if not utterly transform, the way that “gender”, as a generic mode of self-identification, can be redefined and renegotiated in relation to contemporary modes of existence.

For many years, as an aid in my own classroom to enable analyses of women’s status in religions at diverse times and locations, I have employed a diagnostic tool for which I have coined the term “symbolic status”. It has both psychoanalytic and religious reverberations and has helped me to assess the prevailing gendered conditioning of women in religions.<sup>4</sup> My position is that until contemporary times, and then only infrequently, have a relatively small number of women achieved a respected status. By this term, “symbolic status”, I intend to signify a parity of esteem for both women and men within a religious tradition. Obviously, such an understanding avoids appealing to either a hierarchical model of gendered distinctions or to enforced gender complementarity. It acts as an interpretative device to evaluate women’s status in religions from a historical perspective, rather than employing the modern criterion of equal rights. Contemporary debates of women’s rights and religion are still without resolution (Joy 2012). In order to measure the standing of women in relation to men, utilizing the measure of symbolic status, I propose asking the following questions:

1. Are women permitted to become qualified to assume the highest authority in their tradition, i.e. to attain a level of religious agency that is most respected in that tradition? This involves further questions, such as: Can women function as authority figures in preaching, teaching, and advising all persons, regardless of their sexual affiliation? The access to such agency usually depends on being allowed access to relevant specific studies. This, in turn, permits one to elucidate sacred texts in their original languages, so as to both teach and regulate religious institutions – whether on a local or global scale. Unfortunately, because women have been deemed lacking certain traditional male-gendered qualifications, they have been denied admittance to the elevated destiny that is associated with teaching and interpreting sacred texts and systems of divine knowledge.
2. Are women permitted to officiate at sacred rituals, both public and private? Sadly, public and official ceremonies continue to be the prerogative of men in most religions. The male model is recognized as the ideal or norm as the female frame signals a deficiency in the requisite credentials. This failure to meet requirements assigns women to an inferior status that excludes them from presiding at the most important religious rituals. They are automatically relegated to domestic tasks in the private realm.
3. A further question entails whether women can achieve the highest state of spirituality or wisdom that a tradition upholds. All too often, women, with their purported intimate connection to the body – with its physical liabilities and unstable emotions – have been regarded as simply a distraction or, at worst, a temptation that causes the male to stray from his own aspirations to achieve this exalted state.

The responses to such inquiries can be dispiriting at best.

In summary, women have rarely been allowed admission to religious ranks of a stature that would award them parity of worth or authority. Occasionally, in a number of traditions, women have at times been revered – certain women mystics in the medieval centuries in both Hinduism and Christianity come to mind. Occasionally, there have been breakthroughs on the part of women. Joan of Arc supplies a cautionary tale. This is indeed a reminder that these breakthroughs have been seldom praised or promoted as models to be imitated. Most often, such developments have either been denied any acknowledgement or they have later been reinterpreted by male authorities. The women involved then appear as aberrant and in need of correction, even disciplinary action. The work of Phyllis Mack (1992) and Grace Jantzen (1996) attest to such unfavourable developments. Many tentative reforms introduced by women thus turn out, in retrospect, to have been merely a temporary divergence, rather than signalling any permanent improvement in the lives of religious women. With few exceptions, then, women have not been regarded as deserving of high esteem in religious matters. Most women are usually praised because they have demonstrated the requisite female virtues of humility, purity, and obedience. As a result, regardless of present-day debates on gender identity, the tradition of male privilege as it is all too apparent in the major religions – based on reasons and precedents that are often of dubious provenance at best – will still constantly need to be questioned.

In response, this volume does attempt to introduce a number of constructive interventions by women. It will supply the locale, activities, and achievements that run counter to conventional dismissive appraisals of women. This reflects a further important aim of this volume: it is a restorative one. It is written in appreciation of women's vital roles in the gifts they have both offered and continue to offer.

Before introducing the individual authors who have contributed to this volume, however, I would like to explain in more detail my particular strategy in using the word “gift” and its connotations. There are many current debates on the meaning of “gift” and its application to women. I surveyed many of these in my Introduction to *Women and the Gift* (Joy 2013a: 1–52). These meanings range widely. It can actually refer to a donation of money to support a temple or a ceremony. Sacrifices are also material offerings to a deity, and whether it is a sacrifice of petition or appeasement, there is always an anticipation of an appropriate response. Then, there are gratuitous offerings, often associated with women, with no expectation of any remuneration. In contrast, a calculated gift entails an expectation of a return, usually of equal monetary value. The word “gift” in this volume, however, can effect somewhat unpredictable results, depending on its uses in a material, abstract, or figurative manner. It has a variety of resonances, such as that of generating new ideas, of supplying an alternative model, and also of re-envisioning obsolete ones. Innovative creative activities can emerge from reading or writing a narrative and attending sacred ceremonies that may include movement, dancing, meditation, and chant. In these ways, the gift can be an agency of change.

There have been lively discussions recently, contrasting the stark difference between contemporary exploitative capitalism and an originary, precapitalist gift that did not calculate a profit in return (Osteen 2013). Ultimately, however, it was

not such a non-calculating evocation of the gift that had a profound impression on my own appreciation of the gift.

In his book, *The Price of Truth* (2010), Marcel Hénaff undertook a careful analysis of Marcel Mauss's work, *The Gift* (1924). He placed a very different emphasis on the gift as it featured in Mauss's work on the topic of Melanesian islanders' gift-giving ventures. In effect, what Hénaff proposed was that there were no monetary or commodity values involved in Melanesian gift-giving. What was at stake was a form of "reciprocal recognition" that had nothing to do with commerce. As Hénaff observes: "The good offered is not considered something to be consumed but is presented as a mark of respect, as an expression of the desire to honour the existence and status of the other, and finally as testament to an alliance" (2010: 153). What is of utmost significance in this context of the gift is recognition. Such a gift is priceless. This development introduced an entirely innovative dimension into discussions of the gift.

In his analysis, Hénaff only mentions women in passing, but he does refer to the anthropologist Annette Weiner's study of the people of Melanesia, especially of the women. In her work, she expanded on the ideas of both Mauss and Levi-Strauss, describing how Melanesian women were not simply pawns in marriage. They took part in trading among themselves, exchanging both basic and sacred objects. In giving and taking certain goods, the women acted as autonomous and respected agents and were regarded as having a parity of status with men.<sup>5</sup> There is not sufficient space to deal fully here with this topic, but in *Women and the Gift* (2013a: 8–13, 194–207), I have written in depth about its wider repercussions, especially the implications for women.

"Recognition" as a term has entered into many contemporary discussions. Its current usage can trace its lineage back to Hegel, and Paul Ricoeur has revisited his work and subsequently supplied up to 23 definitions to it in his work *The Course of Recognition* (2005, 1–22). But the definition that Ricoeur himself favours is one of recognition as indicating a confirmation of the integrity of another person. This type of recognition is the basis of Ricoeur's ethics, as developed in *Oneself as Another* (1992: 296). According to Ricoeur, I must regard each person with the respect that I grant to myself. The ethical implication is that every person whom one encounters is to be accepted as a human being who is to be treated with the same consideration as I deem myself to be worthy of. This is because recognition, with its profound respect for others, does not condone the exclusion of other human beings. (This takes on special connotations for Ricoeur with reference to the excluded and the downtrodden [Joy 2013b].) Recognition is a very precious gift. What becomes immediately obvious is that such an understanding needs to be incorporated into any future discussions of women and the gift. Recognition has certainly not been evident in the treatment and attitudes towards women in the vast majority of religions even today.

My own response nevertheless was to adopt this innovative insight as another tool to assist in my own diagnoses of the condition of women in religions with specific application to contemporary discussions. A certain qualification, however, would need to be added. This would be that, given the culturally acceptable norms

of past societies and specific religions, it would be extremely difficult to consider the concept of recognition as playing a meaningful role in attitudes and ethical conduct towards women. As I stated earlier, I had initially used “symbolic status” as a device to estimate the level of acceptance given to women in a number of significant religious activities. Symbolic status supplied a type of objective measure that allowed an estimation of the prevailing attitudes towards women in past eras. But the concept of recognition, as it is defined by Ricoeur, can greatly enrich such evaluations. What is implied by recognition is the willingness to accept another human being as fully human. Ricoeur does not explicitly name human rights as one of his criteria in his ethics. His understanding of recognition is much more complex, incorporating solicitude for all others that I know and hold dear but justice for all others in the world whom I do not know personally (Ricoeur 1992: 118–194). Such a stance emphasizes that the intimate and intrinsic nature of our relationships with all others – which Ricoeur posits as integral to human identity – be of a personal or political nature.<sup>6</sup> One would also have to add that it is a deep love of this world and its creatures that also informs Ricoeur’s position. It is this type of demanding ethics that needs to be integrated into any estimation of women and their position in religions.

As a result, it appears that at times it will be appropriate to consider the position of women by using both of the above measures of appraisal. The tool of symbolic status supplies certain facts and objective criteria by which to make an objective appraisal of their social and cultural conditioning in religions. At other times, in current contexts, however, it is more beneficial to question whether, from an ethical perspective, women have been recognized and enabled to participate in religious events, to pursue studies, to officiate at ceremonies, etc., in ways that respect their inherent worth and integrity. Although these respective tools may not always correspond exactly to the variations in subject matter of certain chapters in this book, the term “recognition” provides an invaluable element in helping to reflect on the dynamics of women in relation to religion.

The chapters in this book are not arranged in a precise chronological or thematic order, and so each one may be read independently. They represent an extraordinary range of topics. In addition, they incorporate a variety of academic approaches towards their subject matter. As such, the book could appear somewhat indiscriminate in its use of method and theory. There is, however, one predominant and unifying theme that resonates throughout all of the chapters. This is the undiminished yearning of women over the centuries to search for ways to participate in a religion that does not diminish them but allows them to flourish and express the fullness of their being. It is the quest for such a realization that is at the heart of what I propose as the diverse modes of “gift-giving” by women to religion. This yearning is indeed a sentiment, even a passion, to which many of the essays in the volume bear poignant witness.<sup>7</sup>

The first essay, by **Carol Meyers**, concerns the topic of sacrifice, which is, in both literal and metaphoric senses, a contentious topic for women. Sacrifice in its literal guise can imply the ritual slaughter of an animal in an attempt to beseech, placate, or express gratitude to a divine being. It is basically accepted that none of



the major religions appear to have permitted women to perform such a ritual. Carol Meyers, however, dismisses this conventional view, critiquing certain works that still imply women's roles in ancient Israelite rituals had negligible impact. Meyers' position also stands in marked contrast to a statement made by Luce Irigaray, who states:

One thing is obvious: in the religions of sacrifice, religious and social *ceremonies are almost universally performed by men*. Men alone perform the rite, not women or children (though male children can sometimes act as acolytes). Women have no right to officiate in public worship in most traditions, even though that worship serves as the basis and structure for the society. (1993: 73)

With these remarks, Irigaray does not intend to support the idea that women should immediately become ritual specialists in sacrifice. Her intention is to alert the reader to the fact that women's exclusion from officiating at such rituals is symptomatic of what she regards as a much more fundamental form of sacrifice that is related to women. This exclusion implies that women's necessary subordination relies on their association with an unruly natural world, which, in turn, needs to be subdued by regulated practices and rituals. As Irigaray further observes:

The religion of men masks an act of dispossession that has broken the relation to the natural universe and perverted its simplicity. Clearly, religion is a figure for a social universe organized by men. But this organization is founded upon a sacrifice of nature, of the sexed body, especially of women. It imposes a spirituality that has been cut off from its roots in the natural environment. Thus it cannot fulfill humanity. (1993: 191)

In making this comparison, Irigaray posits women's exclusion from sacrificial activity as dependent on this affiliation of their bodies with nature, at once lush and fertile, yet wild and untamed, and sorely in need of strict management. A corollary of this position is the idea, conspicuous in Christianity, that if one wishes to be spiritual, the body must be chastened because of its natural evil proclivities.<sup>8</sup>

Drawing on recent archaeological and anthropological studies, Meyers contests any such absolutist pronouncements about the absence of sacrifice, principally in relation to women. Her presentation first contextualizes a gendered view of religious life by first situating the role of women in the ancient Near East, i.e., in cultures other than those of ancient Israel. She contends that investigations of sacrifice and sacrificial offerings in ancient Near Eastern societies have mainly focused on reports in surviving written documents. These sources have mostly recorded sacrificial rituals connected to official cults honouring patron regional deities. Such public sacrifices were enacted at communal shrines, altars, and/or temples by professional priests. The textual records are largely the product of male scribal traditions, obviously attesting to the activities of male priests and worshipers. On Meyers' account, this approach is blinkered because it omits the fact that female priests and functionaries did exist in many Near Eastern cultures. Meyers states that women were involved in aspects of communal sacrificial practices and in rituals of ministering to the dead, e.g., ancestor cults, and as priestesses at shrines. Yet the records ignore the fact that much religious praxis among premodern peoples also occurred in households where women were probably the major practitioners of domestic religious rituals.

Meyers' work seeks to redress this imbalance in the received knowledge by inspecting the practices of ancient Israelite women, using ethno-archaeological materials to compensate for the lack of texts. (Their practices are, in Meyers' view, virtually absent from the Hebrew Bible.) Meyers allows that, while Israelite women could also bring sacrifices to be offered, they were never part of the priestly sacrificial rituals of the actual slaughter of animals. (Meyers does nonetheless relate the story of Hannah, where she and her husband together sacrifice a bull in fulfilment of a vow made when she prayed for a child [1 Sam 1: 11].) Although women did not play a major role in official temple practices, Meyers argues that their ritual activities should be considered to be as essential to the maintenance of society as were the great temple sacrifices. She declares that there were only a few temples and that the majority of Israelites worshipped in their homes. From this perspective, she declares that the existence of sacrificial offerings made by women in households were vitally concerned with both essential activities of reproduction and life maintenance that assured the continuity and prosperity of their families and ultimately of the nation.

Such exacting work on the part of Meyers also provides a stimulus to rethink the ways in which scholars from later historical periods tended to obscure such information of women's participation in sacrificial rites. Meyers emphasizes that the later Jewish tradition defined sacrifice as strictly a male act. As a corrective, Meyers proposes that women's roles in rituals, with sacrifices of food, need to be regarded as those of specialists in their own right. Norma Joseph's contribution later in the volume on contemporary women's relation to food and nourishment, portraying women's roles in relation to household rituals and sustenance, provides a latter-day update of this important ritual component. Both papers advocate a re-evaluation of rituals in domestic or private life as having just as important a role in the preservation of the life of a community as the major public ceremonies. All too often, such roles are relegated to the private domain and regarded as having little impact on the males' major spiritual dealings with deities. It is as if the modern public/private division has intensified this attitude and cast a negative retrospective shadow that has demoted women's private tasks and rituals, judging them as unworthy of any esteem. Yet Meyers contends that such indispensable tasks, and the gifts that the women also offered to deities, need to be appreciated as being just as essential to the flourishing of human existence and propitiation of the deity. Meyers' work can be appreciated as establishing a solid ground for reconceiving Israelite women's ritual tasks as those of a ritual specialist, who could attain a measure of symbolic status, depending on the importance of her role. Further examination could then expand on such activities as constituting women's vital contributions to life and religion in their historical period. However, what becomes apparent in this chapter is that it would be difficult to establish convincingly, from the lack of relevant textual material, exactly what these levels of importance for specific tasks might have been.

In her chapter, Diah Arimbi praises an Indonesian woman novelist, Abidah El Kalieqy, and her work as comprising a very valuable gift to Indonesian women. Abidah El Kalieqy's narratives provide a rich source of insight into the daily lives of Indonesian females, notably on the controversial topic of women's rights in an Islamic setting. Abidah El Kalieqy furnishes Indonesian women with candid

knowledge about their struggles against violence that does not appear in any other medium. She argues that *bahasa perempuan* (female language) is not only crucial but also accurate in presenting women's own experiences and views. This approach helps women readers to strongly identify with the characters, which then leads them to resist the idealized female identity that is promoted by the dominant male Islamic religion and culture.

Arimbi believes that it is indeed necessary to examine women's intimate experiences and the related issues of religious rights in Indonesian Islam through fiction such as Abidah's. This is because fiction can depict powerful episodes of women's struggles with religion over issues that involve a need for rights talk, given the absence of any public discussion on such urgent matters. By scrutinizing this issue of much-needed religious rights discussions, fiction can supply dramatic illustrations and accurate local details of the manner in which women are religiously conditioned in Indonesian Islam. For Arimbi, such a close examination of religion's role is necessary because it plays such a dominant part in the narrowly focused formation of women's religious identity.

Arimbi assesses Abidah's fictional tales of specific issues as providing therapeutic assistance. This has proven to be more powerful and influential than if they were to have been represented in clinical terms or abstract arguments. The characters in the narratives articulate women's own concerns, addressing these issues in an animated and informative way. Such narratives then relate easily to the life experiences of many women as they identify with their own sufferings and grievances.

Abidah takes ethical and moral positions and is extremely insistent on a requisite project of cultural transformation. Arimbi also demonstrates that, in breaking the public silence on these hitherto private matters, as well as providing a voice for women to emulate, Abidah has indeed created a "feminist novel" that speaks to and for women. This is essential, especially in establishing new societal values that will support justice and equality.

Arimbi will also describe Abidah as a revisionist author who refuses to keep silent. This is illustrated when she replaces heroes with heroines and revises the stories of heroic male figures with affecting stories of ordinary women. Her graphic writing can be deemed as an exceptional and unprecedented gift to the women of Indonesia, supporting them in their struggles for reform in a society that prefers silence and resignation. Abidah celebrates female survival. This celebration can be discerned in the multiple creative ways by which women have appropriated her ideas. In her analysis of Abidah's work, Arimbi illustrates the wonderful way that Abidah has given courage to many women to act with a strength that imitates her everyday heroines in their quest for justice and compensation.

**Jinfen Yan** describes the life and unkind times of Lady Wang, who lived in China some time during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries CE. Lady Wang was an outcast concubine who was left to fend for herself after her consort's rejection. What is remarkable, however, is the long narrative poem that she subsequently wrote, *The Complaint*, which depicts her ordeal in vivid detail. *The Complaint* is written according to the genre of what Jinfen Yan refers to as a Daoist "visionary excursion", where Lady Wang goes in search of release from her earthly travails. Such a

visionary excursion is a quest for immortality, in keeping with the Daoist tradition, though it has been primarily associated with men.

This work, written by Lady Wang, provides an extremely rich source of both philosophical and mystical insights. Yet her book fell into obscurity. As a result, instead of attaining the renown that such a complex and extensive work deserved, the book was relegated to a collection of “strange stories” and myths. It was not even attributed to Lady Wang. Only in the twentieth century has the epic tale by Lady Wang finally been accorded the attention it merits and her authorship acknowledged. It is now recognized as a classic of Daoist literature with its many finely drawn details of the visionary journey towards immortality – a state that Lady Wang herself is said to have achieved. Something that Jinfen Yan also stresses is Lady Wang’s struggle for both autonomy and integrity – a distinction that was denied to the women of her time. Yan is resolute in her appreciation of Lady Wang’s achievement in *The Plaint* and in claiming it as a major contribution to the Chinese Daoist tradition – a gift that was of great import and lost for many centuries. Today, restored to its rightful place, *The Plaint* has moved beyond the confines of a male-dominant genre to offer a gift of inspiration for all those who wish to follow the arduous path to become an accomplished being and an Immortal. Women were not forbidden from aspiring to and attaining immortality, so it can be affirmed that, in Daoism, women were deemed capable of achieving the highest spiritual state, one of the categories that I nominated earlier as necessary for attaining symbolic status. Given also the different practices and rituals that were part of the disciplines she needed to perform, Lady Wang could also be classed as a ritual specialist of high degree. Despite the untoward circumstances, typical for women of her time, that initiated Lady Wang’s own quest and the “disappearance” of her writings for many years, it needs to be acknowledged that Daoism now affirms Lady Wang as an Immortal.

**Kathleen McPhillips’** paper is a re-examination of contemporary notions of sainthood that contest the idealized hagiographical writings of women saints’ lives. Her case study is a rebuttal of many traditional pious and sentimentalized platitudes that haunt hagiography. It is also a graphic illustration of the ferocious opposition that independently minded women – even, or especially, nuns – can incur in dealing with male clerical hierarchies. McPhillips investigates the case of Mother Mary MacKillop, a recently canonized Australian saint who lived from 1842 to 1909. She poses a number of disturbing questions about the process of affirming contemporary sainthood. The first query wonders how one can recognize or “hear” a saintly voice in a post-traditional, postmodern society. Subsequently, she inquires in what way textual portrayals of saintly women can be read “otherwise”. How, indeed, can such a contrarian voice as Mary MacKillop’s be understood today? In McPhillips’ view, this can only occur if both the conventions of discourse and the criteria for sainthood are carefully scrutinized.

McPhillips poses such questions because, in today’s secularized world, traditional forms of sainthood can easily appear as eccentric, if not anachronistic. Such traditions, with their notions of unquestioning belief in absolutist dogmas and intransigent institutions, together with the glorification of lacerated bodies, tend to alienate rather than attract. These practices demarcate a particularly hazardous

territory for women. This is because many accounts of female saints have tended to produce an idealized version of a masochistic womanhood that equates femininity with subservience and denial, if not the utter dereliction of her body.

These outdated virtues are highly problematic for contemporary women as they are at odds with current feminist-inspired values of integrity and self-determination. Instead, McPhillips recommends that a rereading of the lives of women saints against the grain, using insights from postmodern and feminist theory, as discerned in the work of Jacques Derrida and Edith Wyschogrod, could prove to be a corrective. It could help to foster, as McPhillips suggests, a project of creating an innovative “feminist religious imaginary”. McPhillips’ paper suggests a new type of reader’s manual to undertake such a reinterpretation of the lives of women saints by examining the life of one recalcitrant woman, Mary MacKillop – who was even excommunicated from her faith by doctrinaire priests. McPhillips proposes that constructing such a counter-modality of feminist hagiography could reveal the lives of women saints to be dangerous texts, i.e. texts which have the potential to reveal a type of “speaking self” that has not been colonized by the Law of the Father.

McPhillips observes that, as yet, there have been no feminist accounts of McKillop’s life that have sought to cross-examine the official version so as to disclose the insubordinate voice of the saint herself. She proposes that, in order to understand who Mary MacKillop was and what she can offer to contemporary women, one has to venture beyond the superficialities of traditional hagiography. One has to delve into the deeper waters of heteroglossia, where contradiction and ambiguity intermingle and where the blurry outlines of a nascent feminine subjectivity might begin to be discerned. Thus exposed, the letters and personal writings of Mary MacKillop could provide a new mode of an unconventional narrative that may provide a contrary wisdom for contemporary religiously inclined women who are seeking an alternative sense of self. This could perhaps be understood as a woman’s unique gift to herself. It would replace the former model deformed by demands to obey orders that amounted to a denial of her own deepest yearnings. This so often has also meant a loss of her integrity. McPhillips’ reading begins to reveal a way that Mary McKillop’s voice could be heard in a way that defines her own ideas of sanctity, which were certainly not in conformity with prescribed Catholic ideals. McPhillips proposes that perhaps listening attentively to the disclosures of such a discordant voice as MacKillop’s can lay the groundwork for further reclamations of the lives of other sanctimoniously reconstructed women saints. Such a mode of reading could also be appreciated as helping women scholars to rehabilitate a woman saint’s life, freeing her from being subjected to male supervision and interference while she is alive, as well as to posthumous editing of her writings. This would perhaps establish a foundation for a realistic recognition of Mary McKillop’s accomplishments.

**Sylvia Marcos** has studied and worked with indigenous women of Mesoamerica for many years. She has written a ground-breaking work about their lives and its cosmovision, *Taken from the Lips: Gender and Eros in Mesoamerican Religions* (2006). In her chapter for this book, Sylvia relates her experiences while attending the First Indigenous Women’s Summit of the Americas (2002) and the subsequent

meeting connected with formulating the statements resulting from the summit. At the same time, Sylvia's work depicts the process of indigenous Mesoamerican women retrieving the ancestral spiritual activities and knowledge that are part of a wider project of decolonialization, i.e. the reclaiming of a heritage that was forbidden to be practised by the colonial powers.

The summit posed difficult questions of what spiritual ideas and practices can be retrieved. This is because in any such reclamation a re-evaluation is involved, from a woman's perspective, as to whether they meet the criterion of justice. In this sense, the summit addressed both spiritual and political issues. Its aim was to help to support the formation of a pan-indigenous collective. Being a witness to these proceedings allowed Sylvia to appreciate the claims of the women, which they themselves understand to be a part of their revived "cosmovision". Sylvia describes this interconnected world they inhabit as well as its epistemic framework. She introduces key words: equilibrium, complementarity, duality, interconnectedness, embodied thinking, and equity – all of which contribute to a view of the world and its inhabitants that seeks harmony rather than discord. As part of this dual movement that is oriented towards both a transformation and preservation of the indigenous culture, Marcos describes the way in which the women seek to revive certain spiritual values at the same time as they assess them in the light of contemporary notions of justice. In this way, they hope to bring a balance back to human existence in ways that address not only the ways of human interaction but also the way of life of human beings as they inhabit the cosmos. For their aim is also to help change the present declining condition of the earth, its atmosphere, and the prospect of actual survival of the planet. Marcos's work provides a clear-sighted and sympathetic account of Mesoamerican women's attempt to undertake this extremely demanding task. Again, there are many facets here that can be linked to recuperating a mode of life that evokes an appreciation of a deep spiritual existence – one that has been lost by the indigenous women. Yet, the indigenous women are not only seeking to restore their own former status and respect within a reclamation of their former spiritual cosmos – something that could be understood as a contemporary quest for recognition. Their aim is also, within a renewed cosmovision, to heal other human beings and the environment. This is a special gift that is presenting to a world threatened with ecological disaster.

**Noriko Kawahashi's** paper is a welcome addition to scholarship concerned with women in that she introduces a contemporary society where women continue to be respected as religious ritual specialists who intercede for their people. Her contribution focuses on the ritual roles of the divine priestesses of Okinawa, who both generate and radiate benevolent spiritual forces for their people. This present-day practice on the island of Okinawa is a legacy from the time of the Ryukyu kingdom, which maintained independence from Japan until the seventeenth century. In this society, the female domain was concerned with religious matters and was held in parity of esteem to that of the male domain, which dealt with politics. Even after the kingdom was annexed by Japan and turned into a vassal state, the traditional ritual centrality of women remained resilient in the face of change on this island. The rituals of these sacred priestesses continue to this day.



Okinawan creation myths authorize the division of roles between women and men. Several versions of the creation myth establish that the first female was a divine priestess, while the first male was a political ruler. The uniqueness of the Ryukyu kingdom in Okinawa lay in this integrated unity of religion and politics, which consisted of complementary roles for men and women. This complementarity of two genders has attracted the attention of many scholars. Okinawan religious tradition still demonstrates the significance of this female-specific sphere, which affects the well-being of both females and males in society. The religious predominance of women is observed at multiple levels, as women are believed to serve as the indispensable communicative links between humans and superhuman entities, most prominently deities. Kawahashi's paper focuses on the ritual role of the divine priestesses (*kaminchu*) who both make contact with and share the blessings of benevolent spiritual forces with their entire village. In describing the vital role of the divine priestesses in Okinawa, Kawahashi describes the manner in which each priestess embodies and radiates these benevolent forces as spiritual "gifts" that promote the well-being of the whole village. Given the respect with which they are treated, it seems that the priestesses of Okinawa are being granted the honour of attaining what I have called "symbolic status" in two categories – that of highest spiritual attainment and, at the same time, that of public ritual expertise – a rare occurrence in any religious tradition for women. At the same time, from both the respect and honour that are given to them in today's world, they could also be described as receiving the gift of recognition by the Okinawan people to whom they minister.

The next chapter is written by **JoAllyn Archambault** and **Alice Beck Kehoe** in honour of Beatrice Medicine of Lakota Sioux lineage. Bea Medicine herself had intended to contribute a chapter to this volume, which would focus on both giving and gifting in the religious realm of contemporary First Nations rituals. In her proposal, she stated that the principal ritual she would examine was that of the once-suppressed, but still practised, Sun Dance. She believed that the centrality of the roles of women in this ritual had not yet been articulated from their own viewpoint. But, sadly, Bea died before she could complete the paper. JoAllyn Archambault and Alice Beck Kehoe then accepted the task of writing in Bea's memory, further developing her insights. Their paper describes the crucial role of women in particular rituals of the Blackfoot and Lakota peoples of North America. They describe in detail the various parts of the Sun Dance ceremony that can only be performed by a woman and the times when a woman's presence is indispensable for the completion of a ritual. In this way, they affirm the esteem that is accorded to women in their communities.

In the worldview of the Blackfoot and Lakota, women are the centre and mainstay of the nation. Men defend it. This is a role that places men on its periphery as they are in contact with outsiders. In contrast, women are born with power of reproduction, a gift from the Almighty. They are highly respected because of this intimate connection with the Almighty and their generative ability and are situated at the core of the nation. The separate tasks of the men and women are deemed to have parity. The legend of First Marriages of the Blackfoot people portrays women as

extraordinarily competent at the skills of survival: the maintenance of life, constructing lodges, making clothing, and looking after provisions. They owned their homes and the accompanying furnishings. In addition, they took vigilant care of revered icons entrusted to their communities by the Almighty. Men were regarded as not particularly proficient in such tasks. Women also played an important role in many ritual performances, where men's participation was often mediated by the women. This strength and leadership allotted to women was erased by the many years of colonization. Their status was eroded, and the colonists did not appreciate the honour in which the First Nations women were held, i.e. the regard in which they were held is very much in keeping with their being recognized as leaders in their respective communities.

In their paper, Archambault and Kehoe undertake to describe the centrality of a Holy Woman in one of the most important rituals of the Blackfoot people, the *Okan* or Sun Dance. This ceremony depends on a woman to make a vow to lead it and to perform the difficult austerities required. Other women help in the ceremony by performing necessary tasks. Bea Medicine had long observed and participated in such ceremonies and had intended to provide her own observations. Archambault and Kehoe have consulted her work, as well as drawing on their own contemporary experiences and research. Their work brings to present-day awareness a compelling narrative of the reclamation of the unique and special roles of women in First Nations communities and the special significance of the ceremonies that are helping in achieving the restitution of their former status in ritual and spiritual matters that today would be understood as that of recognition.

In her paper, **Suwanna Satha-Anand** examines the Vessantara Jataka Tale that in Thai history is one of the most popular stories of the Buddha's past lives. For centuries, it has been considered a "national" *jataka*, a most important source of the religious imaginary of the Thai people. In this tale, Vessantara aspires to achieve future enlightenment by perfecting a virtue of generosity in giving away great gifts. These gifts range from material possessions, jewellery, animals, slaves, and a sacred elephant to even his wife and children. In the traditional reading (or rather listening), the story emphasizes this magnanimous sacrifice of Vessantara as the main focus of the story. Satha-Anand's paper offers a broader critical framework in understanding the story by analysing the great theme of "giving" in context of multiple forms of exchange that pervade the whole story. Satha-Anand argues that, even though both women Amittada and Madsī are "given away" (as payment of debt incurred by her parents in the former and as token of great generosity in the latter), their agency actually plays crucial roles in the story. Amittada urges her husband Jajaka on the journey to bring her servants or else she would leave him, while Madsī's expressed consent and support for her husband in giving away his wife and children actually helps make Vessantara's generosity "perfect." Satha-Anand's proposal of such an interpretation of Amittada's and Madsī's action is something enigmatic and provocative for the Thai cultural world. It demonstrates that a wife's seeming acquiescence need not always be portrayed as an act of submission to authority, but, as demonstrated in this paper, it springs from women's own self-reflection about women's roles in the scheme of events. It could be argued that such



a “gift of self” of these women is in keeping with Buddhism’s highest ideal of selflessness, a virtue and achievement not limited to the monks and men, but perhaps even more subtly applies to women in Buddhist texts and in the Buddhist cultural world of Thailand and beyond. Such an appreciation of women in relation to the gift could dramatically change the status and respect accorded women in Buddhism. Again, it could prove to be a significant step on their way to recognition.

**Norma Baomal Joseph’s** chapter examines Jewish women’s long relationship with food and investigates whether this important aspect of their lives can be recognized. Joseph is aware that women’s connection to food has been taken for granted and that her role in the kitchen, while it is regarded as important, has not been viewed as crucial in a religious sense. By shifting the ethnographic gaze to the kitchen, Joseph also queries whether there is strong enough evidence to appreciate women as ritual experts in this location. Joseph is aware of the pitfalls involved, i.e., that this move could be taken as simply “putting women back in the kitchen where they belong.” In contrast, Joseph observes that food has always been a central element in Jewish community identity and religious life, but that woman’s productive role and her contributions have not been acknowledged. In this sense, Joseph’s work has certain resonances with Meyers’ introductory chapter on sacrifice, demonstrating that women’s roles in connection with food offerings need not simply be slotted into categories of menial work, dutifully done, that do not register in comparison to the more impressive and consequential activities of men in the public and/or religious sphere. Additionally, Joseph raises the possibility of meal preparation being understood as a woman’s exceptional gift, i.e., a type of special offering to her family and community. Joseph applies the language and analysis of gift-giving in an effort to examine closely the role of food and women’s participation within family and community relationships.

As a concrete analysis of religious gift-giving, Joseph undertakes a study of the feast of Purim and the commemorative events, specifically those involving food, that are essential elements of this celebration. Purim is a traditional feast celebrating the victory over the Persians in the fifth century BCE. Three of the four requisite acts associated with this feast involve food: giving food as gifts to friends, giving presents to the poor, and both preparing and consuming a festive meal. In these various undertakings, Joseph discerns women as directing, co-ordinating, and creating these ritual events. From a sociological perspective, women are totally in control of these tasks, but from a religious viewpoint, there has been little, if any, acknowledgment of their performance as constituting ritual accomplishments. Joseph reviews a number of proposals that could be advanced to encourage the valuing of women’s ritual roles in gift-giving as religious. She details the evidence of the centrality of women, firstly within the family, and then within the community. Women are not only givers but also preservers of those resources and ties that are formative in establishing religious identities and relations. In this connection, Marcel Mauss’s theory of gift-giving, whereby both integrity and mutuality are confirmed, is mentioned by Joseph as supportive of such a position. Joseph qualifies her commentary on these acts of giving, noting that research confirms that women, who participate

in the preparation and distribution of these gifts, do understand themselves as both socially and religiously engaged.

Finally, Joseph reflects as to whether these activities and attitudes in relation to the gift-giving rituals at Purim can be extended to include women's other kitchen activities, especially meal preparation. She poses three related yet decisive questions: (1) "Do women create a family by cooking dinner?" (2) "When a woman prepares a meal for her family does she see it as a gift?" (3) "Are meals gifts that create and reflect the bonds and bounds of family and society?" With these questions, Joseph investigates the contours and limits of women's domestic lives that have mostly been restricted to the private domain. By exploring an extension beyond such restraints, Joseph is implicitly interrogating the essentialist ideas of passivity and docility that tend to characterize women's domestic existence. In this way, Joseph's explorations have provided a nuanced appreciation of women's lives that could undermine the stereotypes representative of the public/private divide. It is through the importance of food, as central to both human sustenance and relationships, and by their gifting of it, that Jewish women can realize a sense of strength and influence. Joseph's chapter has clarified a situation where women are involved in a complex network of gifting relationships that support the preservation and performance of family, community, and their religious tradition.

**Azam Torab's** paper explores two types of religious ceremonies, women's votive ritual meals, called *sofreh*, and men's public rituals. Torab examines these two ceremonies as they take place during the month of Muharram. At this time, the ceremonies are in commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Husseyn (AD 680), the third Shi'a Imam and grandson of the Prophet. Shi'a sources present his death as the paradigmatic act of sacrifice. At this commemorative time, both men and women participate in separate rituals that include their votive offerings. In this connection, the votive offerings have a marked significance. What is of interest to Torab is the prominence of the men's Muharram rituals as compared to those of the women, which are contentious and are often maligned. While the men's activities are classed as "Formal Islam," which is a term attributed to the learned scholars (*ulama*), who are male, women's ceremonies are usually designated by the phrase "Popular Islam." This term has connotations of domestic, rustic, and uneducated. The ceremonies of *sofreh*, however, are indeed extremely popular, and they are still allowed by the religious establishment. What is of particular interest to Torab are the specific qualities and attitudes that are evident in this mode of gender binary. Torab introduces the terms "gift" and "commodity" as helpful tools for analysing the wider implications of these ceremonies. They provide a useful lens through which to view the way that gender categories are formed and projected, but also contested, through ritual activities. These insights then have wider implications for the nature of gender ideologies as they function in religion, as well as for power and politics that men often claim as their prerogatives.

The posited opposition of the terms "gift" and "commodity" is familiar territory in anthropological debates on the subject of exchange. The first term, "gift," refers to an offering that is made gratuitously, while the second, "commodity," names objects of commerce, which involve calculations of monetary value. These two

terms are often positioned to represent mutually exclusive types of valuation. They are similar to other functioning oppositions, such as morality/self-interest, reciprocity/market exchange, equality/exploitation, etc. A number of recent studies have challenged this simplified application of a constructed dichotomy,<sup>9</sup> but such forms of opposition do still exist in certain prescriptive religious discourses, conspicuously those concerned with the battle of good and evil – extended often to apply to the divide between men and women.

Torab investigates Shi'a Muslim women's votive practices – discussing work that is based on her anthropological fieldwork in Iran. In this context, the practice of vowing involves a conditional agreement. A person who is beseeching God for a favour appeals to a saint or a supernatural being to intercede for them on a definite matter. At the time, the person vows that an offering or gift will be made if the request is granted. Such votive practices, however, tend to hover somewhere in the space between the realms of “the gift” and “commodity”. These practices are often highly controversial because they also pose a challenge to the prescriptive Islamic texts that do not condone them. The tenets of Islamic orthodoxy regard many of the votive initiatives undertaken by women as innovative (hence un-Islamic) and selfish (hence as having no concern for the common good). This prescriptive system endorses precise definitions of errors regarding intentions and interaction of persons, including relations to saints as being extensions.

What Torab finds of particular interest in terms of a gender symbolism is that these votive practices can sometimes express an agency and even accommodate women's separate claims. In this particular case of votive actions and expressions as part of a singular commemorative sacrifice, it would appear that gender identities are not restricted to the stark terms of opposition of a gender binary.

This becomes especially evident when Torab locates her investigation in relation to the two different rituals and the offerings that are concurrently made annually in remembering the martyrdom of Imam Husseyn. She appreciates that the gender relations traditionally involve constructs referring to two sets of dualisms, firstly, between “formal Islam” and “popular belief” and, secondly, between orthodoxy and heterodoxy. As described above, these terms are often used to assess men's and women's particular beliefs and ritual practices. But in these specific ceremonies, Torab detects an almost fascinating interdependence between the two spheres of male and female activity. There is a certain blurring of any absolute or rigid gender distinctions in relation to gift-giving at these ceremonies. Such a blurring can be viewed as indicating a moderation of the official structures. What Torab observes is that, in this very special ritual situation, women's gift-giving need not necessarily be viewed as inferior to men's but as maintaining a necessary symmetry.

This implies that, at this time of votive offerings in honour of Imam Husseyn's martyrdom, gender difference does not necessarily impose a strict separation or a hierarchal order of preference between men and women's activities. It is a fascinating study of an accommodation that only occurs at this exceptional time when differences between male and female behaviour are not strictly monitored. Instead, a constructive co-existence is permitted. Whether it is calculated or circumstantial, or simply a form of benign neglect, no one seems strongly concerned about this seem-

ing breach of conduct. In this holy context, where gift-giving in the form of votive offerings is central, adaptability is accepted, though nothing is ever explicitly expressed. Such a tolerated inconsistency in traditional gendered arrangements perhaps indicates the constructed nature of most gender arrangements. It could also allow for a fleeting glimpse of what parity of respect between men and women might be. Such lapses on special occasions, when gift-giving and generosity abound, indicate that tacit disparities, which disclose variations in gender relations, are possible. As yet, however, women's roles do still appear circumscribed, and any discussions of recognition at this stage could be premature.

**Stephanie Mitchem's** paper explores diverse aspects of the vibrant gift of African American women's wisdom.<sup>10</sup> She suggests that this wisdom has been socially discounted in the United States. This is because, on Mitchem's account, African American women have continued, for the most part, not to be recognized for their dynamic, life-promoting contributions. Mitchem proclaims the positive and healing effects of black American women's wisdom. She appreciates this gift of African American women's wisdom as being centred on a notion of embodied spirituality where spiritual, emotional, and physical elements of existence intertwine. Yet she also understands that this embodied spirituality was born of the experiences undergone by women who were marginalized, or even ostracized, by social neglect. As a result, she describes it as a resilient spirituality that has emerged to sustain African American women, informed by a deep understanding of the hardships they have suffered. At the same time, it is fortified by their reliance on courageous healing powers that they believe God provides. Unfortunately, because this robust and potent force in their lives has not yet been publicly recognized, this gift of embodied spirituality, which helps to sustain African American women's very existence, is not widely celebrated as a part of American culture.

This gift, with both its strengths and weaknesses, is the central focus of Mitchem's essay. She admits that it is complex and not easy to define. This is because black American women's embodied spirituality reflects diverse social contexts and locations. Another cause for its variability is that, though it affects black women's religiosity, it is not unduly influenced by any single denomination. It is, like most spiritualities, layered with multiple textures that result from always unpredictable blendings of race, class, age, religion, and gender. It embraces a spirituality that points towards more bountiful futures, and it is in this connection that Mitchem discloses the most significant implications of this exceptional gift.

Mitchem depicts the gift of embodied spirituality as enriching the experiences of African American women who trust in a God who supports them in their struggle with their fears and doubts. In so doing, she affirms that each woman who vanquishes such fears can move towards the realization of her deepest aspirations. It is in this manner that black American women's embodied spirituality, a compound of soul/body/emotion, witnesses to the promise of a new abundance of life as black women enthusiastically express their special God-given gifts.

Mitchem also describes the way that, beginning in the mid-twentieth century, the dominance of a white, elite male order was challenged by many women and people of colour from all corners of the globe. These groups articulated their misgivings

with the male-dominant language and structures. They also found the courage and inspiration to re-state their religious meanings on their own terms. One of those challenges arose from black liberation theology that began in the United States in the 1970s. In turn, this animated the rise of black womanist theology in Christianity. According to Mitchem, womanist theology is both a black and a feminist liberation theology in which black women are finally placed at the epicentre, rather than on the periphery, of scholarship. The inclusion of black and womanist scholars' thought was part of a radical shift in academic disciplines, as canons were questioned and new vistas of pluralist ventures were advanced. Against this background, Mitchem situates the plenteous gifts of black women's embodied spirituality as one of the sources for expressing rich and prolific insights that both celebrate life and generate new possibilities of enhancing their existence. Mitchem's vibrant work offers a basis for building a compelling case that black women's embodied spirituality, though lacking thus far in acclaim, is indeed deserving of recognition.

In her presentation, **Leslie Orr** challenges the general acceptance of women's alleged docile or receptive role in Hindu religion. She describes how South Asian scriptural norms and popular stereotypes have led many to believe that the role of women in social transactions and gift exchange has been an entirely passive one. Hindu religious texts often depict men as engaged in acts of giving, whether the gift supports a ritual, a holy person, or a temple or even a father giving a daughter in marriage. These texts tend to reinforce the view that a woman's own agency in giving is severely constrained.

Orr proposes that, if the historical evidence is examined carefully, it becomes evident that such received ideas deserve to be reconsidered. Certain medieval inscriptions record the fact that women were very frequently the patrons of Hindu and Jain institutions and of worship practices. In these records, women in medieval Tamilnadu, India, are shown to be active not only in religious giving but in the buying and selling of land and in the sponsorship of public works. Through these activities, women established links with and became players within social, economic, and political networks of their localities. These inscriptions further indicate that women's social identities and economic activities were not wholly defined with reference to a restrictive patrilineal framework.

Orr's specific study examines Tamil inscriptions dated between 850 and 1300 CE during the time of the Chola Dynasty from six different temple sites where women were active as donors. The records reveal how worship was conducted but more importantly the roles and images of women. Her chapter not only provides a realistic description and analysis of the activities of medieval South Indian women; it also helps to provide a more nuanced awareness of the various interplays of the gift at work in such a society.

Another area of interest to Orr are the activities of the king whose various modes of interaction with women illustrate diverse dimensions of the gift. Although women's agency and autonomy as givers have been stressed, other women are frequently described as being held in bondage or property to be given away. Examples would be images of a victorious king keeping conquered women as enemy booty. Their fate could be that of a concubine or simply of an object given away to faithful retain-

ers as part of the spoils of war. In addition, there are erotic depictions of the king's dalliances, not only with his consort wives but also with independent goddesses, who bestow their favours or gifts on him. These figures portray further multifaceted aspects of the gift evident in this era.

The fact that women do appear as donors definitely does contribute to an appreciation that elite women did engage in a more disparate range of activities in medieval south India, even if the wider spectrum of social conditions for women do seem somewhat circumscribed. In one sense, the women donors could be regarded as attaining a measure of respect, or even renown, as an independent sponsor of religious rituals. This could perhaps be accepted as an additional way of women gaining symbolic status, in addition to the three distinct ways described in the early part of the Introduction (xii, xv).

In the final chapter on wisdom and her gifts, I undertake a survey of recent attempts at reclaiming the virtue of wisdom as a female figure. Such a recuperation is fraught with difficulty, as any argument to associate wisdom with actual women has to consider that initial descriptions of wisdom in the scriptures did not necessarily specify women. Wisdom was a noun that, in both Greek and Latin, simply had a feminine grammatical gender – nothing else. In time, however, certain attributes of wisdom came to be regarded as feminine, and so a case was made for the further instantiation of wisdom as a female being. Many thinkers, both male and female, still find this to be very tenuous grounds on which to base such an anthropomorphic move. Yet both Elizabeth Johnson and Anne Klein set out to examine what such an association can provide for contemporary women.

At the beginning, inevitable questions arise as to whether wisdom is appropriate, as the term “women’s wisdom” is redolent with arcane references to innate spiritual powers belonging to women. Johnson and Klein, however, do not want to retrieve any such idealistic projections but rather to investigate unexamined potentialities connected with wisdom that could be helpful to the contemporary women. They both view this present-day reclamation of wisdom as being a support and a goal – an acknowledgement that wisdom has gifts that can enrich human existence.

Johnson and Klein’s respective appeals are mainly to women who have an allegiance either to Catholicism (Johnson) or to Tibetan Buddhism (Klein) and who are receptive to spiritual connotations. Klein examines *Prajñāpāramitā*, the figure of supreme wisdom, as an inspiring spiritual vehicle. She proposes that this figure of wisdom is comprised of subtle qualities that would benefit today’s women as they seek to forge their identities from among a profusion of competing influences. Klein aligns wisdom with the insight that arises from a Buddhist cultivation of the mind that fosters wisdom and compassion as the fruits of enlightenment. Foremost among the refined qualities of wisdom that Klein cites is that of a primordial freedom. She also promotes an orientation that does not attempt to consider the world from a dualistic orientation that separates and divides.

The gift that wisdom bestows on an enlightened mind is that of a non-egoistical demeanour that allows one to act compassionately yet without any desire for a precise outcome. This is an apt description of the gift of wisdom and, as such, a mode

of conduct that Klein believes is not simply beneficial for women but ultimately for all human beings.

In contrast, Johnson is not immediately concerned with refining one's mindset. Her principal interest is rather one of redefining the way that God is understood and, as a result, of introducing wisdom, not simply as a feminine way of being, but as an intrinsic aspect of God. Johnson wants to move beyond traditional hierarchical and vertical attributes of the divine so as to permit Sophia, as wisdom incarnate, to infiltrate reality as an agent of care and justice. This would radically transform the way God is understood as at work in the world. An important gift that Johnson links to wisdom is that of a transforming energy. For Johnson, it is not necessarily the mind that is transformed, but one's own mode of participation in the world. The liberatory power involved is essentially relational – cultivating a connectedness that Johnson identifies initially with women. Yet she also will concede that wisdom's gifts are deserving of being adopted by all humans. This is because the liberatory influence of wisdom intervenes for Johnson in a manner that seeks to bring justice to all beings in this world. Ultimately, then, both Klein and Johnson do not confine their recommendations regarding wisdom's gifts solely to women but recognize their beneficial effects for humankind.

Klein and Johnson definitely understand wisdom as the provider of gifts. As noted, at first glance, both seem to associate such gifts with specific religious ideals that have been ascribed to women. Yet in their respective explorations in the realm of wisdom, they both discern that if the world is to be changed so that compassion and connectedness become the guiding virtues of human existence, wisdom's gifts merit being shared by all people. This attitude could perhaps be interpreted as one that is recommending that wisdom's largesse, as practised by the women of yesteryear, be offered as a reparatory gift to the contemporary world. But I believe that things are more complex than this.

Both Johnson and Klein appreciate that contemporary women are striving to define their identities in ways that avoid the somewhat outdated pieties of women as the "moral guardian" or the "angel of the house" in the private sphere, at the expense of her admission to the public world. Both Johnson and Klein, however, seem troubled by the fact that women, as they venture to exercise their emancipatory options, are in danger of losing the beneficent side of their former private connection to family and relationships. In addition, they are also in danger of losing an expansive generosity that imbued the gifts that they once unstintingly offered. One needs to tread carefully here as shades of essentialism hover in the background. Yet the result is a strategic step beyond such former essentialist tendencies. This is evident in both Klein's and Johnson's recommendations that they are trying to amend the conditions of care and gifting so that neither past sacrificial tendencies nor current egoistical claims for rights will prevail. They each seek to appeal to selective resources of their respective religious traditions that would allow wisdom and her gifts to be re-envisioned in a manner that prevents such unfortunate outcomes. Their conclusions indicate Klein and Johnson's own personal generosity, in their hopes for a transformed and transformative world, where gifts of wisdom reach out unreservedly to all beings who seek their assistance.



All of the essays in this volume are explorations of the multiple ways that women can relate and be related to the gift. Certain chapters are historically situated and attempt to revise those versions that have dismissed women's gifts to religion by consigning them to the backwaters of the past – often leaving women mute, passive, and destitute. Other papers, revisiting past attitudes towards women and their gifts, have offered amendments to former prevailing standards that either misrepresented or idealized women. Some contributors have sought to retain what they consider to be particularly admirable qualities of womanhood represented by mothers and wives. They have consequently demanded a more equitable contemporary re-evaluation of these roles in relation to such indispensable gifts. Others have suggested that distinct gifts affiliated with women can be transformative and encourage developing innovative ways by which such gifts can be rehabilitated.<sup>11</sup> These moving words and interpretations, offered also as gifts by the women who have generously contributed to this volume, are all, in their very distinct ways, attempts to honour women and their gifts, both past and present. These writings portray historical and contemporary struggles, depicting women as they strive to find ways to express their integrity and hope in a world that can frequently be hostile. The women who wrote the chapters, and the women whom they evoke with their words, together witness to the infinite sources that women have drawn upon to convey their deepest intuitions and their profoundest longings. They have graphically portrayed the abundant gifts that women have chosen to share with humankind from the fullness of their being. They have opened possibilities. They have shared their yearnings for change. My hope is that this book will contribute in some measure to healing the wounds and to remedying the omissions that have denied women what I describe as the gift that is *non pareil*, or priceless: recognition.

## Notes

1. Lévi-Strauss declares: "The prohibition of incest is less a rule prohibiting marriage with the mother, sister or daughter, than a rule obliging the mother, sister or daughter to be given to others. It is the supreme rule of the gift, and it is clearly in this aspect, too often unrecognized, which allows its nature to be understood" (Lévi-Strauss 1969: 481).
2. In Joy (2013a), I examined this phenomenon in more detail. I also referred to the important work of women anthropologists on the topic of the gift, Leacock (1981), Strathern (1988), and Weiner (1976).
3. Many excellent works have been published on these topics. See, for example, Kathy Rudy (1997), DeConick (2011), and Jacobsen and Pellegrini (2003).
4. The term "symbolic" is associated with the work of Lacan who decreed that women were excluded from the Symbolic order – where language and law (the law of the Father) coincide. By not having access to this order women were automatically excluded from the civilized world – being consigned to a domestic and inarticulate existence dominated by the body and the natural processes,

especially those of maternity. The religious element of symbolic refers to words and signs that indicate deeper and profound meanings that need to be explored. By linking these two ideas together with the term “status”, my idea is to suggest categories and qualifications that would assist women to break down the male-constructed barriers that have prevented women from exercising their minds and language so that they can participate fully in the public world.

5. In her work, *Women of Value, Men of Renown* (1976), Weiner described the situation of the way of life of the Trobriand Island women. “Through annual harvests of yams and women’s activities in mortuary distributions, women are given public recognition for the active, pivotal role they play, a role demonstrating the worth of men in their lives and, equally, their own sociocultural value. Throughout a marriage women and men have equal negotiating power” (1976: 230).
6. In an early essay (1965) Ricoeur distinguished between “the political” and “politics”. “The political” deal with notions that are implicit in political discussions concerned with ideas of the “common good” and of benefit to all concerned, whereas “politics” refers to the intrigues and power struggles inherent in politics itself. He maintained this distinction, though he did qualify it in his later work.
7. bell hooks’ book, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (1990 [2014]), inspired many women with her moving depictions of this feeling and/or impulse.
8. I have engaged with the work of Irigaray on the subject of women and sacrifice in Joy (2008, 2009).
9. See Marcel Hénaff, *The Price of Truth* (2010).
10. In her paper, Mitchem uses the terms “African-American woman” and “black American” woman interchangeably.
11. With all such suggestions, great care needs to be taken so that former distortions or discredited stereotypes are not simply duplicated.

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# Chapter 1

## Contributing to Continuity: Women and Sacrifice in Ancient Israel

Carol L. Meyers

### Introduction: Sacrifices, Places of Sacrifice, Personnel

This assessment of the participation of women in the sacrificial practices of ancient Israel must first consider the nature of those practices according to the major source for Israelite life, the Hebrew Bible. Sacrificial procedures are described at length in the priestly portions of the Pentateuch; and sacrificial events are mentioned in the narratives of Genesis, Exodus, and other biblical books. These texts suggest that sacrifices – “blood sacrifices,” entailing the slaughter of animals, and “unbloody” offerings of other foodstuffs, notably oil, wine, or grains – were an important aspect of Israelite community and family life.<sup>1</sup> However, the meaning and role of Israelite sacrifice is not fully understood. Ever since William Robertson Smith published his influential book about Semitic ritual practices (1889), scholars have proposed a variety of theories about the origins and functions of Israelite sacrifice (summarized in Hallo 1987; Nakhai 2001: 20–35). Yet none is fully satisfactory, and no unitary theory seems sufficient. Still, sacrifices in the Hebrew Bible can be understood as a metaphorical means for attracting divine attention and assuring divine presence. Many sacrifices were considered gifts to the deity, in gratitude for something received or in the hope that something would be granted in return (although the terms “gift” or “giving” are rarely connected with sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible).

Gifts, it has been long realized, are not really given without expectation of receiving something in return (see Mauss 1923–1924).<sup>2</sup> Thus, the deities of ancient Israel, as elsewhere, were perceived to have agency and participate in “a system of reciprocal exchange” (Gudme 2010: 78), whereby offerings motivated the deity to provide what people needed (e.g., fertility of the soil and the body). But sacrifices had other functions too.<sup>3</sup> Many were part of sacral meals enjoyed on festal occasions; as such,

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they enabled people to experience communion with the deity and also contributed to a sense of identity with the past, present, and future participants in the festival and thus reinforced community solidarity (Meyers 2012: 157–63). Other sacrifices helped people deal with guilt or provided an opportunity to plead for recovery from illness or celebrated life cycle events. The scholarship on Israelite sacrifice reveals a highly complex cultural system, incorporating and expressing a multitude of important social and religious values while also serving a myriad of communal and political functions (e.g., Anderson 1987; Hendel 1989; Klawans 2006; Levine 1974; Milgrom 1991; de Vaux 1964).

Sacrifice in ancient Israel, as for other peoples of the ancient Near East, was integrally related to the concept of shrines and temples as dwelling places for deities. In fact, the biblical terms often translated “temple” literally mean “palace” or “house.” Consequently, sacrifices at some level were meant to meet the needs of the resident deity by serving appropriately lavish meals. Sacrifices thus actualized the conceptual and essential reality of access to the divine as source of sustenance and life and, on a collective level, the survival of the community (Levine 1968). Several biblical texts (e.g., Ps 50:12–14) understand this anthropomorphic cast to Israel’s shrines as symbolic rather than real, whereas other texts (e.g., Judg 9:9, 13) apparently accept the notion of sacrifices as providing food desired by God. What sacrifices were thought to do for God and accomplish for the people is somewhat elusive; yet their role in helping the Israelites negotiate the difficulties of life is indisputable (see below).

Some sacrificial commodities were consumed by those who brought the offerings to Israelite shrines, especially in the context of communal festivals (see Greer 2013). However, the bulk of them, especially daily offerings at the major shrine, apparently became priestly portions – that is, the livelihood for priests, who had no land and revenues of their own. Sacrifices thus had a vital economic role in maintaining the priests (see Deut 18:1–5),<sup>4</sup> who served various community functions, including adjudicating difficult disputes, maintaining national traditions and values, and disseminating them by teaching, providing divinatory services, and acting as healers.<sup>5</sup>

People probably offered sacrifices at regional or local shrines for most of ancient Israel’s existence in the Iron Age (twelfth to sixth centuries BCE) until apparently banned in the seventh century, yet almost all of the sacrifices portrayed in the Hebrew Bible are associated with a central shrine: the wilderness tabernacle or the Jerusalem temple (built in the tenth century BCE). The sacrificial rituals are performed by the leading priestly officials, identified in biblical tradition as the descendants of the first priest Aaron:

- Aaron [the high priest] lifted his hands toward the people and blessed them; and he came down after sacrificing the sin offering, the burnt offering, and the offering of well-being (Lev 9:22).
- Bring the tribe of Levi near, and set them before Aaron the priest, so that they may assist him. They shall perform duties for him and for the whole congregation ... doing the service (Num 3:6–7).

- Enroll the Levites by ancestral houses and by clans. You shall enroll every male ... [they will be the ones] attending to the duties of the sanctuary (Num 3:15, 28).<sup>6</sup>

These passages proclaim the leadership of the Aaronides as part of the priestly tribe of Levi and also indicate that only men performed ancient Israel's priestly duties.<sup>7</sup>

These texts led scholars to conclude that women had no role in religious life in general and in the sacrificial cult in particular. Perhaps the most influential biblical scholar of modern times, Julius Wellhausen, assumed – on the basis of his experience as a professor in Germany in the nineteenth century – that women lacked political rights and therefore had no place in religion (1897: 94). Studies published well into the twentieth century present similar views or simply ignore women; because women rarely appear in biblical texts dealing with religion and sacrifice, they are virtually nonexistent in the scholarship analyzing those texts.

By the closing decades of the twentieth century, feminist biblical scholars brought an end to scholarship that ignored women. Using a wide variety of approaches and methodologies, they recovered women's religious lives in the biblical world albeit with different perspectives (Brenner and Fontaine 1997; Bellis 2000). In so doing, they recognized that the main source for women's religious practices, the Hebrew Bible, has significant biases, one of which is its overwhelming androcentric interest in national affairs with little attention paid to household life and concomitantly to the lives of women.<sup>8</sup> They also showed that the male-only priesthood did not preclude female participation in sacrificial activities.

This essay continues by examining the role of women as cultic functionaries or practitioners in societies surrounding ancient Israel. This contextualization of the practices of the Israelites is essential, for they were heirs to aspects of both Canaanite and Mesopotamian culture.<sup>9</sup> Next the role of women in sacrificial practices in ancient Israel's communal shrines, for which the Bible is the chief source of information, is assessed. Then, women's sacrificial practices in household ritual are identified by drawing on archaeological and ethnographic data. Finally, the significance of women's household religious roles is discussed.

## Ancient Near Eastern Context: Women and Sacrifice

The Near Eastern context considered here includes only the Semitic world: Mesopotamia (Babylonians and Assyrians), Syria (Amorites), and Canaan. Egyptian and Hittite (Anatolian) materials constitute important but more distant cultural realms. It should be noted, however, that in Egypt priestesses (*hm.t.ntr*) served mostly in the cult of the goddess Hathor; but their duties probably did not involve the provision of sacrifices or offerings. Another Egyptian sacral role, that of "god's wife," included making offerings; but this role was limited, chronologically and geographically (Robins 1999: 163–64). More important, tomb paintings indicate

that female relatives, usually wives and daughters, made offerings to the dead (Robins 1993: Figs. 56, 57, 72; cf. Robins 1999: 169).

Ritual texts recovered from Mesopotamian and Syrian sites provide important information about cultic practices of the royal court and large temples (but not of ordinary folk). The terminology used for cultic functionaries is bewildering in its variety (Henshaw 1994; cf. Harris 1989: 149–50), and the exact nature of their duties can rarely if ever be determined. Still, the lists of temple personnel indicate that women held dozens of different cultic offices throughout Mesopotamian history (Nemet-Nejat 1999: 99–100). However, the lists do not indicate that these women actually offered sacrifices; rather, men probably dominated as officiants at sacrificial rituals (Henshaw 1994: 3). The term “priestess,” often used in English translations of these documents, erroneously implies that women conducted sacrificial procedures because the English word priest (or priestess), with respect to ancient religions, connotes officiating roles that included the offering of sacrifices.<sup>10</sup>

A case in point is the high-ranking functionary known as the *en* (*ēntu*)-priestess, who was in charge of the deity’s household. Along with her considerable administrative and economic roles were cultic functions, which some believe included making offerings to the gods (Marsman 2003: 491). However, others rightly dispute that (Henshaw 1994: 3, 45). The *ēntu*’s responsibilities were probably not cosmic and communal but rather intercessory and familial; she was charged with the recitation of prayers for relatives (Nemet-Nejat 1999: 192).

Similarly, the duties of another elite group of female functionaries known as *nadītus* or *nadītu*-priestesses involved bringing offerings and praying; but these women did so as part of family responsibilities rather than as community priestly officials. For example, one *nadītu* of the Old Babylonian period, a woman named Lamassani, writes to her father that “[I make] morning and evening offerings before my Lord and Lady, and I constantly pray for your well-being” (Harris 1964: 121–22).<sup>11</sup> Another *nadītu*, a princess named Erišti-Aya, appears in eighteenth-century BCE texts from Mari, a Syrian site on the middle Euphrates notable for the many letters to and from women discovered in its archives. In the way she addresses her letters to him, Erišti-Aya indicates to her father the king that she habitually prays for him: “To my star, my father, say thus (says) Erišti-Aya, the one who prays for you” (Batto 1974: 96). Praying for their fathers and benefactors, and even presenting offerings on their behalf, is arguably the regular role of the *nadītu* women, who were placed in quasi-cloistered residences by their parents. Their sacrificial practices were familial not communal.

The intercessory roles of female cultic figures extended to the realm of the dead. One *nadītu* mentions in a letter to her father that she is providing offerings for his deceased father (Harris 1964: 121–22). Similar responsibilities for women who are not cultic officials appear in legal texts requiring a woman to perform rituals, including the offering of foodstuffs (beverages, grains, oil, honey, even meat), for deceased ancestors at their place of burial (Nemet-Nejat 2004: 143–44).

The responsibility to provide for the dead is also evident in documents discovered at Emar (Tel Meskéné), a Syrian site on the middle Euphrates. This site is



especially important for biblical studies because many Emariote sacral practices are similar to biblical ones (Fleming 1995). The Emar tablets include a group of documents concerning the duties of heirs. Several texts specify that a daughter will be heir and then instruct her to “invoke my gods and my dead” (Huehnergard 1983: Texts 1 and 2). The dead were thought to have continuing needs after death, and descendants of the deceased were responsible for meeting those needs. Proper care for the dead included the provision of drink and probably food offerings as well as reciting the names of the ancestors (Pitard 1996). At Emar, commemorating the dead seems to be linked to maintaining family property rights rather than to securing ancestral beneficence (Schmidt 1996).<sup>12</sup>

A similar pattern – little or no role for women in sacrificial offerings but association with funerary or ancestor cult offerings – appears in Canaanite texts.<sup>13</sup> A significant corpus of documents, written in a language (Ugaritic) very close to Biblical Hebrew, has been recovered from excavations of the port city of Ugarit (Ras Shamra). Although none contain ritual texts, many describe religious practices; they indicate that bloody and unbloody sacrifices, similar to those mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, characterize the cults of Canaanite deities (Hackett 1997: 413). No female cultic functionaries are mentioned, although a queen is recorded as pouring wine on a sown field (Merlo and Xella 1999: 296–300), an act outside the sacral realm and thus not actually part of the sacrificial cult.<sup>14</sup> Another queen (Danatyata) prepares a feast/sacrifice for an artisan deity: she “dines and wines the gods, serves and honors them” (KTU 1.17.5.21–31; cited in Lewis 2008: 70).

Canaanite women, however, did provide offerings in funerary rituals or ancestor worship. A royal funerary ritual calls for a deceased king’s sons and daughters to make animal sacrifices (del Olmo Lete 1999: 231; cf. 237). And a queen (Tharyelli) apparently participated in bringing sacrifices to invoke dead ancestors (Marsman 2003: 533, 591). Similar information about nonroyal households is lacking, but the existence of an ancestor cult in the general population seems certain on the basis of comparative evidence and the importance of filial obligations (van der Toorn 1996: 164).

Archaeological data also indicate that food and drink offerings were provided for the dead in family tombs, which were situated to facilitate a close relationship between the living and the dead; this was important because the deceased were considered transcendent or quasi-divine and thus could exert a benevolent and protective influence on the lives of their descendants (Lewis 1989: 50; Xella 1995: 2060–61). The archaeological evidence of tomb offerings is not gendered nor are the ancestors to whom they were given. However, because healing and fertility – both concerns especially important for women – were matters for which assistance was sought from the dead, women as well as men surely helped maintain a tit-for-tat relationship with the dead. Moreover, deceased women no less than men were tutelary figures (Mazzoni 2003: 9), and their female descendants likely brought gifts to them. Offering food and drink to the dead invoked their aid in the service of family survival (Xella 1995: 2066). It also assured the continuity of the family inheritance and contributed to collective family identity (van der Toorn 1996: 177).

In sum, various female functionaries can be identified in national or city cults of the ancient Near East, but none were directly responsible for carrying out regular sacrifices. The reasons for this are unclear, although one possibility is that the blood flow of menstruating women rendered them periodically incomplete and thus ritually impure (van der Toorn 1995: 2052; cf. Winter 1983: 38–40). The extraordinary sanctity of shrines, as houses for deities, required that officiants be ritually pure in order to approach the deity; and genital discharges were considered sources of impurity. The presence of female functionaries, such as *nadītu* women and *en* (*entu*)-priestesses attached to Mesopotamian and Syrian temple complexes can be attributed to economic circumstances. For example, the *nadītu* women, who lived in temple cloisters and were expected to be celibate and childless, handled legal and economic concerns related to the preservation of family estates (Harris 1964: 109; 1989: 151–55; Lahtinen 2011).

Whether non-priestly women brought animal or plant sacrifices to local or community shrines cannot be determined but is likely in that substances offered as sacrifices were produced by the labour of both female and male family members. Depictions of high-ranking women in Mesopotamian art show them in prayerful stances at shrines, where they would have brought votive offerings to the gods (Harris 1992: 949); similar behaviour can be posited for women of other classes. Also, many sacrifices were part of festivals or special ceremonies and involved family consumption of portions of the foodstuffs offered.

What stands out in this survey of Near Eastern sacrificial practices is participation of women in ancestor cults. As “priestesses” attached to specific shrines or as daughters or widows visiting family tombs, their prayers and offerings were part of their family responsibilities. Providing funerary offerings would assure the continuity of family property and of family life and livelihood. In providing offerings to the dead, women appealed to ancestors who were either quasi-divine beings themselves or who had an intercessory role in securing the beneficent attention of deities.

## Sacrifice at Communal Israelite Shrines: Women’s Participation

Despite the enigmatic biblical references (Exod 38:8; 1 Sam 2:22) to serving women stationed at the entrance to the national shrine, Israelite women had no priestly roles in the communal cult.<sup>15</sup> One possible exception is the participation of female cultic personnel in a mourning ritual in the temple precincts (Ezek 8:14; Meyers 2008: 289–90). However, women did participate in communal sacrificial events. References to women and sacrifice appear in the priestly and Deuteronomic texts of the Pentateuch and in other passages.<sup>16</sup>

Although not readily apparent in English translations of the Hebrew Bible, women as well as men could bring sacrifices. For example, Leviticus and Numbers frequently use the noun *nepeš*, which means a “person” of either gender, in

prescribing certain sacrifices. In twenty-seven instances, this term – which is grammatically feminine – includes both women and men.<sup>17</sup> This is clear because Num 5:6 refers to any “man or a woman [who] wrongs another” as a *nepeš*. Thus, the presence of this term in the ritual regulations of the Pentateuch indicates that both women and men could offer extra-domestic sacrifice (Gruber 1992; Meyers 2000b). Similarly, the stipulations in Deuteronomy 12 (and in Deut 16:11, 14) for bringing offerings and donations to the central sanctuary are addressed to the masculine plural “you.” This pronoun is gender inclusive in these passages because of the specification in Deut 12:11–12 that the rejoicing of those who bring offerings includes all household members:

... then you shall bring everything that I command you to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name: your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and your donations, and all your choice votive gifts that you vow to the LORD. And you shall rejoice to therefore the LORD your God, you together with your sons and your daughters, your male and female slaves.<sup>18</sup>

Other verses in Deuteronomy (16:11, 16) also include marginal members of society: strangers, orphans, and widows are all entreated to share in the responsibilities and joys of the sacrificial system (Meyers 2000a).

A poetic passage (Mic 6:6–7) expresses displeasure with the reliance on sacrifices instead of righteous living for earning divine favour by asking powerful, hyperbolic, rhetorical questions:

With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high?  
 Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, and calves a year old?  
 Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil?  
 Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, for the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

The speaker in this text is a woman, probably a prophet, who is arguing against the misuse of sacrifice and also against the suggestion that in desperation she would offer her own child as a sacrifice (as Abraham nearly does in Genesis 22) (Gruber 2007). In the process, she reveals that women might offer both bloody (rams and calves) and unbloody (oil) sacrifices. This verse is especially important because it dates to the eighth century BCE, whereas the Pentateuchal texts reached their final form centuries later. It thus indicates that references in later biblical texts to female participation in sacrificial rituals do reflect earlier practices.

The offerings in the Micah text and in Leviticus and Deuteronomy are prescribed communal sacrifices. Individual votive offerings were also brought to the temple in Jerusalem or to regional shrines. Votive offerings, in ancient Israel as in the ancient Near East, were conditional promises to the deity that certain acts would be carried out when and if the deity granted the petitioner’s request (Cartledge 1992: 12). Vows were made in times of danger or distress – war, journeys, illness, and infertility. They were voluntary but binding, although vows of young or married women who did not control their own property could be rescinded by their fathers or husbands, respectively (Num 30:3–15; Cartledge 2000). Sacrifices, notably burnt offerings, were typically the materials promised in a vow (Lev 7:16; 22:18, 21; Num 15:3;

29:39), although precious metals or one's labor or even the labour of one's offspring could also be votive offerings. Not surprisingly, given the problems of reproduction in the ancient world, infertility was an issue that often led women to make vows.<sup>19</sup>

The most prominent biblical vow narrative is the story of Hannah in 1 Samuel 1–2. Hannah is with her family at Shiloh, a major Israelite shrine in the centuries before the temple was built in Jerusalem, for a sacrificial event (during which she receives an allocation of the sacrificial food). Unable to conceive and taunted by her co-wife Peninnah, she vows that if God grants her a child,<sup>20</sup> she will dedicate that child to the service of God (1 Sam 1: 11). Her prayers are answered, and she gives birth to a son (Samuel). When he is ready to be weaned, she fulfills her vow by bringing him to the priests at Shiloh. She also brings an offering consisting of “a three-year-old bull, an ephah of flour, and a skin of wine” (1 Sam 1:24).<sup>21</sup> She and her husband together slaughter the sacrificial bull (1 Sam 1:25), a procedure otherwise associated with males and assumed to be a male prerogative. In this moving narrative of a woman's plight and its successful resolution, Hannah proves herself to be resourceful and proactive, with independent access to the shrine and its personnel. Moreover, her piety is evident in the fact that she adds a sacrifice to the requisite vow fulfillment, which would have required only the dedication of the child.

The story of Hannah's sacrifice bridges the realms of communal practice and household life. An intensely personal family dilemma is resolved at a community shrine (and in the process draws attention to the exalted role of Samuel as a priest, judge, prophet, and kingmaker in biblical narrative). Another kind of sacrifice at the communal shrine likewise relates to childbearing – following childbirth, women are to bring certain animals to the priest, who performs the sacrificial rite (Lev 12:6–8).<sup>22</sup> Apart from national and family celebrations, childbirth issues are prominent in the narratives and regulations concerning women and sacrifice. But would such issues have been handled only in extra-household sacral contexts?

## Israelite Household Religion: Women's Sacrificial Practices

A narrative, somewhat like the Hannah story, describes how Samson's unnamed mother together with her husband sacrifice a kid and grain on a rock altar to enlist divine help in overcoming her barrenness (Judg 13:15–23). The altar is apparently in a field on family property (see Judg 13:9) and thus conceptually part of household space.<sup>23</sup> Apart from this narrative, women's household religious activities are virtually invisible in the Hebrew Bible. Those activities served two basic functions, both relating to continuity: assuring generational continuity through reproduction, as in the narrative about Samson's mother, and assuring household survival by securing sustenance for its members.<sup>24</sup> Both leave traces in the archaeological record.

Reproductive rituals are indicated by the presence of cultic objects in assemblages of artifacts used by women in domestic structures. For example, assemblages from Tell Masos, Tell el-Far'ah, and Tell Beersheba (summarized in Willett 1999:

107–56) and other sites (Tell Halif; see Hardin 2010) include functional objects used by women, such as grinding tools and textile implements as well as vessels used for food preparation and also apotropaic items.<sup>25</sup> The apotropaic items are beads and shells, amulets featuring the Egyptian god Bes (the protector of pregnant and nursing women and their infants), Eye of Horus symbols (to keep away the evil eye away from mothers and infants), and even lamps (to give light but also to keep away evil spirits threatening newborns). Information from Near Eastern texts as well as ethnography indicates that these items comprise a repertoire of artifacts used by women to secure reproductive success (Meyers 2005; Willett 2008).

Other objects in these assemblages – notably incense altars – are associated with offerings. A verbal form of the biblical word for incense (*qtr*) means “let an offering go up in smoke”; and another form stands for the “burning of the ‘burnt offering’” (Clements 2004: 12). Incense was a prominent temple offering, where it had propitiatory, protective, and purificatory functions. It probably served similar purposes in non-temple settings as in Egypt and Assyria-Babylonia (Nielsen 1992: 406). Incense smoke could keep evil spirits, thought to be especially dangerous to nursing mothers or their offspring, at bay; or the fragrant aroma could restore health to an ailing woman or child by pleasing the deity. Women’s incense offerings were an important part of their efforts to achieve reproductive success.

Offerings at tombs are also relevant. Ancestral tombs, whether located on family lands or in a village cemetery, provided the physical and symbolic means for maintaining a family’s identity and patrimony (Bloch-Smith 1992: 146; Olyan 2008: 115, 118–20; Stager 1985: 22; Stavrakopoulou 2010; van der Toorn 1996: 211). Deceased ancestors, who continued to reside in their shadowy, preternatural post-death state in the tombs, were the grantors and guarantors of usufructuary rights to the next generation. The burial of the deceased ancestors in the family tomb and the subsequent provision of propitiatory postmortem care assured the family’s ongoing claim to its patrilineal *nahālā* (“inheritance”) and served the strong Israelite principle of the inalienability of immovable property (Meyers 2010: 127–28). Like the Canaanites (see above), Israelite offspring brought offerings to ancestral spirits, judging from the food and drink vessels found in Iron Age tombs (Bloch-Smith 1992: 65–108, 150; Schmitt 2012: 440–49).

At least some of the mortuary deposits were related to women’s concerns or functions. Small terracotta pillar figurines depicting women with bare breasts are found in tombs and so too are the small Bes amulets thought to safeguard newborns and their mothers. These women’s ritual items likely accompanied offerings to deceased ancestors by women seeking to become pregnant, experience successful gestation and delivery, and bear viable offspring. The figurines may also have been used in healing rituals (Darby 2014: 334–38, 404–5). Note that allusions to rituals appealing to the therapeutic powers of ancestors appear in biblical texts (van der Toorn 1996: 231–32).

Ethnographic data likewise indicate that women sought help from ancestors for their reproductive concerns. In traditional Mediterranean societies, women are considered especially skilled at invoking the dead in the service of the living – notably to secure fertility and safeguard the health of mothers and infants (Sered 1992:

18–29). Women visit the tombs of saints and biblical figures as well as those of ancestors, imploring or petitioning them for help in conceiving and in delivering a healthy child. The aid of ancestors is not automatic, however. Gifts such as flowers, candles, tomb covers, or contributions of money for tomb maintenance are provided to encourage the deceased to help his or her descendants.

The importance of the Israelite ancestor cult is indicated by biblical proscriptions. Although providing food for the dead is not directly forbidden, tithed food cannot be used for such purposes. When people complete payment of a tithe, they must affirm that they have not presented any of it to the deceased: “I have not offered any of it to the dead. I have obeyed the Lord my God” (Deut 26:14). Moreover, consulting the dead – a practice reflecting the belief that the dead had prognosticative and other powers – is prohibited (Lev 19:31; Deut 18:10–11).<sup>26</sup> In forbidding aspects of the ancestor cult, these texts, along with prophetic, narrative, and psalmodic passages that object to seeking prophecies from the dead (e.g., Isa 8:17–20; 2 Kings 21:6; Ps 16:4), willy-nilly attest to the enduring vitality of deceased ancestors and thus to the importance of the dead in the lives of the living. Tomb offerings were a link between generations, with those provided by women helping to assure the biological continuity of the family household.

Food and drink offerings meant to secure sustenance were also part of household meal rituals as indicated by archaeological data. Small and miniature vessels recovered in household contexts signify sacrifices of token amounts of grains, liquids (probably wine or oil), or even cooked foods. In a corpus from Tall Jawa, 31 of the 159 cultic artifacts were small vessels, and nine were miniature ones (Daviau 2001: Table 1). Ordinary vessels could also serve cultic purposes. Other household objects were specifically cultic, for similar forms are found at shrines (Holliday 1987: 265–70, 275–80). At Tel Halif, for example, the discovery of cultic objects together with vessels of food consumption suggests that household meals were accompanied by ritual acts (Hardin 2010: 136–42). The offering of small portions of food and drink to deities, ancestors, or both was arguably a component of household repasts. All family members participated in providing these mealtime offerings, but women arguably took the lead as is explained in the Discussion.

## Discussion

The absence of priestly roles for women in the Israelite temple cult has typically been explained as deliberate and sexist; if authority and prestige were priestly qualities, women were “excluded” from the priesthood because they were of lesser social rank. However, this argument overlooks the fact that the priesthood itself excluded all men who were not members of the priestly tribe; priesthood was more a matter of class than gender. Other arguments – for example, that women lacked the physical strength to carry out priestly duties or that the priesthood was a profession and as such not open to women, who could not be professionals – have likewise been discredited (Marsman 2003: 536–52). Concerns for cultic purity, which would be

compromised by the presence of menstrual blood, may have played a role. However, demographic and economic factors should also be considered. Given their marginal highland environment (see Meyers 2013: 38–58, 97–103), Israelites needed to encourage reproduction and female household labour, thus precluding the participation of women in regular priestly roles that would remove them from family life (see below).

Even without professional priestly roles, Israelite women had multiple opportunities to bring sacrifices to community shrines and to make offerings in their own households (including tombs). Like most men, women did not officiate at communal shrines; they did not slaughter sacrificial animals or accept unbloody offerings. However, they participated in those events sometimes as individuals, as when Hannah seeks to become pregnant or when women restore purity after childbirth, but mainly as members of a family or larger kinship group. That said, it should be emphasized that household rituals were the major and often only kinds of ritual activity experienced by most Israelites. Large temple complexes were rare in ancient Israel, in contrast to surrounding areas (Faust 2010). Similarly, dedicated cult rooms or corners in domestic structures or their courtyards have been identified in Iron Age strata at only a few sites.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the principal place of Israelite ritual activity for both men and women was the household.

Offerings of incense, food, or drink made by women in household contexts (including tombs and, as for Samson's mother, fields) were surely motivated by reproductive concerns. Having children was critically important for demographic/economic reasons. Most people were agrarians living in farmsteads or small rural villages and towns, and children were vital members of the household work force. In addition, with no communal institutions for the aged, adult children were the sole providers of sustenance and care for elderly parents.

Given the difficulties in achieving pregnancy and the dangers to both mother and newborn, strategies for achieving reproductive success were hardly trivial. In the absence of modern medicine to overcome infertility and assure healthy pregnancies and births, ritual practices were the only way to confront the problems of procreation. Indeed, across cultures and even in more recent times when medical treatment is available, women's religious activities surrounding the various stages of reproduction are ubiquitous (Falk and Gross 1989). These activities are meant to intervene with divine forces – securing the protective presence of benevolent forces and averting the destructive powers of malevolent ones. Only through such rituals could women tolerate, on a psychological and affective level, the life-and-death perils of childbearing.

Offerings directed toward successful procreation were also important for maintaining the household across generations. Progeny inherited the family patrimony and helped sustain the larger kinship group in which families were embedded. Traditional agrarian societies like ancient Israel were group oriented, and the perpetuation of the household and the kin community was a crucial component of group identity and community values. Because continuity across generations of families and their kinship group depended on reproductive success, offerings



presented by women – whether in the household or community shrines – were understood to contribute to the survival of the family and thus of the larger group.

The role of women in mealtime rituals was likewise a significant part of Israelite religion. As those responsible for producing foodstuffs, women allotted portions to ancestors or deities in addition to household members as is seen in several biblical verses (Ackerman 2009: 144–45). The prophet Jeremiah (Jer 7:18; 44:18–19) condemns a household ritual in which women prepare a bread offering and drink offerings. This is a family activity: children gather firewood, and men kindle the fire for baking the grain offering; but it is clear that women are in charge. The prophet's polemic provides information about an existing practice of Israelite women. That their offerings were part of the reciprocal behaviour understood to be essential for household sustenance is indicated by how the women resist Jeremiah's tirade: they assert that their offerings and libations assured their households of "plenty of food" and prosperity (Jer 44:17).

Women's household offerings also helped shape the national sacrificial cult. It is rarely recognized that household offerings provided the model for the sacrificial regime at communal shrines, where sacrifices comprised the basic foodstuffs (grains, wine, and oil) of the Israelite diet (Meyers 2014: 235–37, 241–42).<sup>28</sup> That is, the food and drink of temple sacrifice were household staples writ large, with household dietary regimens being the precursors of sacramental ones, not vice versa (Stowers 2008: 12). Undeniably, there are important differences of scale and function between temple sacrifice and household meals; yet they both involve comestibles, which are the medium connecting the temple sacrifices with quotidian daily fare (Hastorf and Weismantel 2007). Mary Douglas famously declared that "a very strong analogy between table and altar stares us in the face" (Douglas 1972: 20); and she argued that everyday and extraordinary eating are intertwined systems of meaning, metaphors of each other (cited in Sutton 2001: 20). In preparing food for daily household offerings and for the many of religious feasts, Israelite women thus carried out activities that simultaneously engaged their religious beliefs and sustained their families; in this way too, they contributed to household continuity.

Evaluations of Israelite sacrificial practices, even by feminist scholars (e.g., Bird 1987: 405–6), tend to assume that what male priests did in the central sanctuary were the most important sacral activities and that what women did at that shrine or elsewhere was marginal. Worse, women's household religious activities have been considered magic and therefore improper if not dangerous (e.g., Fohrer 1972: 155). Male sacral acts in community life are considered inherently more powerful or prestigious than those of women in household life. Similarly, formal structures of religious life are viewed as more important or even more legitimate than the informal but no less structured aspects of religious life practised by women (Sered 1996: 21). In other words, many scholars have accepted the biblical perspective, which privileges national cultic practices controlled by male priests.

Letting go of these culture-bound constructions enables us to recognize that, in providing offerings to their god(s) or their ancestors, Israelite women were performing services just as important for household and community life as were the rituals carried out by male priests at communal shrines. To be sure, the existence of ancient

Israel under the protective aegis of its god was believed, at least by some, to be dependent on the proper execution of temple rites. But temple rites in the central shrine were far removed from the daily lives of most people, which took place in the household, ancient Israel's primary and most important social, economic, *and* religious unit. Women were ritual experts in their households no less than were priests at the national shrine. Their sacrificial gifts were understood to contribute to the survival of their families and to the continuity of their people.

## Notes

1. Because the generic Hebrew terms for "sacrifice" and "offering" have overlapping meanings in the Hebrew Bible and because other terms are also used, no clear definitions can be provided; all involve the contribution of foodstuffs to divine or semidivine (ancestral) beings. See Anderson (1992): 873 and Gorman (2009): 20.
2. Although Mauss's work has been extensively criticized, its importance in presenting the idea of reciprocity has endured (so Satlow 2013: 6 and Hénaff 2013: 13–14). See Stansell (1999): 68–71, for a useful cross-cultural list of the features of gift exchange in ancient societies, including ancient Israel.
3. For the various types of sacrificial offerings at the central shrine, see Gorman (2009): 22–26.
4. In their access to sacrificial commodities, the elite members of the priesthood, like the political elites, had access to a rich diet unavailable to the peasantry comprising most of the population. The perks of the priesthood gave priests a vested interest in maintaining sacrificial practices.
5. The lower ranks of the priestly clan, probably the majority, performed the mundane tasks of a major institution: a myriad menial and probably unpleasant tasks associated with the slaughter of large animals and maintaining the sacred precinct.
6. All translations of biblical passages in this essay are from the New Revised Standard Version.
7. Although the sacrificial texts of the Pentateuch probably did not reach their canonical form until the exilic or postexilic periods (sixth–fifth centuries BCE), they likely reflect practices going back to the construction of the temple in the tenth century, if not earlier (see Gorman 2009: 21).
8. For other problems in using the Hebrew Bible as a source, see Meyers (2011): 62–67.
9. Ancient Israel is now understood to have emerged from Late Bronze Age Canaan, with many early Israelites in fact being Canaanites (Bloch-Smith and Nakhai 1999; Bloch-Smith 2001).
10. An online dictionary defines priest as "a person whose function is to make sacrificial offerings and perform other religious rites as an intermediary between deity and worshippers" (<http://www.yourdictionary.com/priest>).

11. “Lord” and “Lady” are titles for deities.
12. The importance of patrilineality in the transmission of property is maintained in Emar by the legal stratagem of having inheriting daughters considered male as well as female (Pitard 1996: 125).
13. The term Canaanite designates the inhabitants of the regions of the east Mediterranean – between the Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon Mountains in the north and El-Arish in the south and between the Mediterranean Sea on the west and the Jordan River to the east – from the Middle Bronze Age to the early Iron Age (second millennium BCE).
14. The king was the principle cultic official in Ugarit, and the queen’s role was subsidiary.
15. The serving women were probably menial labourers (Meyers 2000c), although it is possible that they had an oracular function (Fischer 2004: 50–62).
16. These texts likely reflect already existing practices; see above, note 7.
17. Lev 2:1; 4:2, 27; 5:1–2, 4, 15, 17, 21, 25, 27; 23:29–30B; Num 5:6; 15:27, 30; 19:22; 31:19, 28; 35:11, 15, 30B. Note that *nepeš* appears more than once in some verses.
18. The wife is not included in this list because she is probably subsumed in the masculine “you” representing the senior conjugal pair of the family group.
19. Conception was often difficult because of poor nutrition and the young age of women at marriage. Death in childbirth was all too common, with women having a lifespan significantly shorter than that of men. Infant mortality rate reached fifty percent or more. See Meyers 2013: 97–100.
20. Most translations have “male child,” but that rendering is “indefensible” (McCarter 1980: 61).
21. The Hebrew text makes it quite clear that Hannah brings these sacrificial items. Later tradition apparently viewed sacrifice as strictly a male act, for several ancient versions of the book of Samuel found among the Dead Sea Scrolls preserve a reading that has Hannah’s husband bringing the sacrifice, thus depriving her of a cultic role that legitimately belonged to women in the biblical period (Meyers 1996: 122–26).
22. Sacrifice after childbirth may be related to the impurity of lochial discharge; see Burnette-Bletsch 2000. It is unlikely, however, that this practice was observed among all Israelites in the Iron Age.
23. A household in ancient Israel was a socioeconomic unit consisting of people (family members and perhaps servants), their dwelling and its associated “hardware” (installations, tools, vessels, and utensils), their land (including the family tomb, whether on family property or in a village necropolis) and animals, and also their activities. See Meyers (2013): 104–5.
24. Rituals relating to reproduction were performed mainly though not exclusively by women; and rituals relating to sustenance were household rituals in which women were playing a key role.
25. For the gender attribution (to women) of food preparation and textile production, see Meyers (2003): 428–34.

26. However, a narrative that predates the biblical ban on contacting the dead relates how the woman of Endor calls up the deceased prophet Samuel to help King Saul (1 Sam 28:2–12). Women perhaps were especially adept at necromancy.
27. Notably cult room 49 at Lachish (Aharoni 1975: 26, 30, 41; pl. 60) and cult corner 2081 at Megiddo (Loud 1948: Figs. 100, 101, 388; Zevit 2001: Figs. 3.54, 3.55).
28. Meat (bloody offerings) was not consumed by most people except on special occasions; but as prestige foods, they were a major part of temple offerings.

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## Chapter 2

# Abidah El Khalieqy's Struggles of Islamic Feminism Through Literary Writings

Diah Ariani Arimbi

### Introduction

Women, gender, and Islam in Indonesia always form a contested site because women's *locus* in relation to Islam is problematic when their status is seen through the eyes of the practiced Islam.<sup>1</sup> Various interpretations of Islam have managed to define, locate, and perhaps entrap women under certain fixed categories. Yet, women's position in Islam in Indonesia is never about religious matters alone. The interests and agendas of various social, political, and cultural actors within the society play a significant role in shaping the life of public culture. Indeed, within such perspective, Islam is not simply a religious ritual; the spirit of Islamic values can be reflected in all aspects of life, art, and cultural expressions. Nonetheless, despite the vast availability of Islamic productions in guidebooks, magazines, fiction, and popular works, works on the politics of Islamic identity within Indonesian settings are still limited. This also applies to issues concerning women and Islam and their conditioning within Indonesian contexts as portrayed in fiction writing. Not many Muslim writers have raised matters of women in Indonesian Islam in their writings. However, among these few writers, Abidah El Khalieqy fills in some of the blanks in writing about women and Islam in Indonesia. Her gift to Indonesian readers is manifested through her literary works. In this gift she often discusses problems that Muslim women in Indonesia frequently deal with. Her narrative gift touches

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This is a shorter version of a book subchapter that discusses the works of Abidah El Khalieqy. For a more complete version, see Diah Ariani Arimbi, *Reading Contemporary Indonesian Muslim Women Writers: Representation, Identity and Religion of Muslim Women in Indonesian Fiction*, ICAS Publications Series (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009).

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Indonesian readers, especially on women's rights in the heart of Islamic discourses. Through Abidah's stories, issues on education and reproduction rights, and also domestic violence, are placed at the centre of women's self-construction. The ways women conceptualize their bodies and their sexual and reproductive functions, which are intricately linked to their social, cultural, and political environments, are some of Abidah's narrative gifts. She uses the language of the female body to represent women's own culture. Women's rights in the private sphere, which are commonly neglected by Muslim writers, are brought to life through Abidah's fictional tales. This is truly her indispensable gift.

## About Abidah El Khalieqy

Abidah El Khalieqy's narratives began to appear in the mid-1990s (Rampan 2000). She is not only known as a prose writer but also as a poet. Indeed, she started her writing profession first in poetry then moved on to prose writing. Abidah<sup>2</sup> was born on March 1, 1965, in Menturo, Jombang, Indonesia. Growing up in Jombang, the capital of *pesantren*,<sup>3</sup> she was exposed regularly to Islamic discourses. Her countless short stories, poems, and essays have been published in several magazines such as *Horizon*, *Republika*, *Gadis*, *Amanah*, *Ulumul Qur'an*, and many others. Her poems were included in *ASEANO: An Anthology of Poems from Southeast Asia*, in 1995. Her publication, in addition to some poetry anthologies, incorporates prose works like *Ibuku Lautan Berkobar* (My Mother the Burning Sea, 1997), *Menari di Atas Gunting* (Dancing Above the Scissors, 2001), *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* (Woman with a Turban Covering Her Neck, 2001), *Atas Singgasana* (Above the Crown, 2003), and the latest *Geni Jora* (Jora's Fire, 2004), which won the second prize for 2003 novel writing conducted by *Dewan Kesenian Jakarta* (The Jakarta Arts Council) and her latest work *Mahabbah Rindu* (Longing for Love, 2008). Her poems about women and abortion were translated into English by an Australian poet, Geoff Fox, and published in a cyber album in 1998.

A recognized Indonesian literary critic, Budi Darma, has compared Abidah's work to Taslima Nasreen's, the Bangladeshi woman author whose works are mostly regarded as blasphemy to Islam.<sup>4</sup> But far from Nasreen's radicalism, Abidah's presentation of Islamic gender ideology is subtle, yet voices strong challenges to Islamic patriarchal interpretations (El Khalieqy 2004a). Most of her works are weighted with women's issues located within Islamic perspectives, and she continuously criticizes formal and informal institutions entrapping women in the shackles of their gender. The strongest theme in her narratives is her call for social change and female empowerment to occur within the sanction of Islamic doctrines. In *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*, published under the auspices of YKF (*Yayasan Kesejahteraan Fatayat*, Fatayat Welfare Foundation) and the Ford Foundation, Abidah powerfully takes issues of women's right to education and reproductive control into account. She says that her interest in feminism is based on her experience of what she sees and senses:

If we see injustices how can we be silenced? ... What is happening in our world? So, how can we be alert of all those? Perhaps, if I speak about those problems in my writings at least I have participated with my friends or those having concerns with problems of injustices and discrimination. (El Khalieqy 2004b)

Her narratives are laden with “the woman question,” and she constantly creates and recreates her female characters as those who react and offer counterresponses to patriarchal oppression.

Abidah's engagement with Islamic feminism started when she was an active member of *Yayasan Kesejahteraan Fatayat* (YKF), an NGO seeking to empower women. She posits:

I try to keep myself informed about the advance of feminism either from the Western world or from the Islamic world such as the Middle East.... I am currently active in YKF, an NGO aiming for women's empowerment. This NGO is not affiliated with NU (*Nahdlatul Ulama*, a leading Islamic organization in Indonesia) although most members are also members of NU. With this NGO, we are redefining Qur'anic exegeses, researching on how to create guidelines of *fiqh perempuan* [Islamic jurisprudence from women's perspectives] in *pesantren* similar to those done by Sinta Nuriyah with her *Forum Kajian Kitab Kuning* (*Kitab Kuning Studies Forum*). (El Khalieqy 2004b)

Abidah believes that the best way to disseminate the notion of feminism, be it Islamic or any other, is through literary writings, since narratives are reflections of everyday lives that the readers can easily identify with and make meaning out of. Her narratives are her tools in reacting against injustices and discrimination against women, which in the end she hopes can inspire readers to create better conditions. The best way to vocalize her feminist views is through writings because she can use her own language, the woman language:

The more I develop my knowledge and interest on feminism, the more I like discussing about it as it is now actual and I think I have to start writing about it. I know some writers who have no concern about it.... Then, I wrote with my own language, which means that I have full authority on *bahasa perempuan* (female language), utilizing that female language which is not masculine. Masculine language colonizes almost all spheres both knowledge and literature.... Actually, what I feel [about the masculine hegemony of the language] is not coming only from actual discourses that are in circulation but also because my friends around me feel the same way. Thus, I must begin entering that sphere [feminism]. (El Khalieqy 2004b)

Abidah argues that *bahasa perempuan* (female language) is not only crucial but also accurate in presenting women's own experiences and views. It creates a strong identification that suggests a resistance to the essentializing agenda of identity politics created by the dominant male culture (El Khalieqy 2004b). Of course, the problematic of female language is complicated when women project language assumed to be women's but which is, instead, a projection of hegemonic male language. In this case, women write in response to men's ideas rather than their own genuine insights. Nevertheless, through careful reading and scrutiny, the problematic of female language can be identified and reclaimed in order to provide women with an entry into self-knowledge and language. Abidah refers to Nawal Sa'dawi's books, specifically *The Hidden Face of Eve*, which she believes corresponds to the views she wants to

articulate in her writings. The core of her narratives lies in the spirit of equality, though it may appear in different shapes through different literary characterization or different poetical expression.

Abidah's prose works are usually set in a *pesantren* background. The *pesantren* world is the world she knows well, and the language of *pesantren* is her mother tongue. She even calls herself "*santri* minded" (having an orientation the same as a *pesantren* student). Her intention is to bring to life a *pesantren* world that has been largely ignored and marginalized by a number of writers. Only a very few writers, such as Huda Huzairini and A. A. Navis, take account of the *pesantren* world. The *pesantren* world is normally regarded as exclusive, estranged, closed, very conventional, and traditional. It is assumed to be a closed world because only those of *santri* background and family live there. Unless one wants to have an education in Islamic teachings, ordinary Indonesians do not usually live within a *pesantren* area. It can be said that the role of Abidah's writings is to bridge the *pesantren* and ordinary Indonesian world, linking the imaginings of the general Indonesian public to the factual life in the *pesantren* world. She is thus situated among these very few writers who explore the dynamics of *pesantren* life against the grain of the received view of the outside world. Her narratives are her readings of the personal experiences of those living there, though they are not necessarily hers.

Her challenge to orthodox interpretations of women's role and position in Islamic society brings criticism from various *ulama* (Arabic, meaning Islamic clerics). Her novel, *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*, is an example. The first edition of this novel – about 3000 copies were distributed free to NGOs, *pesantren*, religious and social organizations, and *kyai* (Indonesian, meaning Islamic male clerics) – was controversial when first launched in 2001. Many in the invited audiences, which included *kyai*, showed their disagreement with her story which touched on women's right to education and the not-to-be-spoken-of issue of women's reproductive rights within Islamic tenets. In 2009, when the novel was adapted into a film with the same title, the novel sold thousands of copies, according to the Indonesian newspaper *Jawa Pos* (26 March 2009, 25). The novel became extremely popular after its film adaptation. Nevertheless, the following discussion will centre only on the novel.

## Muslim Women and Their Rights

Abidah's *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* (Woman with a Turban Covering Her Neck) was first published in 2001. The publication of this novel was partly funded by Yayasan Kesejahteraan Fatayat (YKF), Yogyakarta, and the Ford Foundation (FF). It is stated in the introductions from both YKF and FF that the novel seeks to educate readers on women's rights, especially reproduction and education rights within the tenets of Islam. In this novel, Abidah clearly depicts her feminist project, often defined as Islamic feminism.

The novel strongly articulates women's demands for equality with men. The title itself suggests that the positioning of women is always confined within limitations

produced by men. *Perempuan berkalung sorban* literally means a woman who is wearing *sorban* as her necklace. *Sorban* is the headdress worn only by male Muslims. Metaphorically, the title signifies prescribed relations between men and women, i.e., their social positions in Islamic society where religious interpretations play a strong role in the construction of those relations and positions.

## Education Rights

The story focuses on the life of Nisa, the shorter name for Annisa Nuhayyah, meaning an intelligent woman (El Khalieqy 2001: 51). Nisa is the daughter of KH. Hanan Abdul Malik, a famous *kyai*, the head of a *Pondok Pesantren Putri* (*pesantren* for girls). As the only daughter, it is understood that Nisa will be her father's successor in heading the *pesantren*: nowadays, it is common for *pesantren putri* to be headed by *Ibu Nyai*, the wife, or the daughter, of a *kyai*. However, Nisa does not see herself living only within the *pesantren* walls; she desires to seek knowledge beyond the *pesantren* walls, and she often mingles with the village children outside the *pesantren*. Nisa is raised in a patriarchy-dominated world where the sexual division of labour is seen to be natural. At school, she uses reading materials supportive of this division: within the family, the father is the breadwinner working in an office, the mother is in charge of domestic duties, the son plays in the yard, and the daughter helps her mother's household load (2001: 10). Abidah displays her criticism of Indonesian formal education, especially of the elementary level where the ideology of the sexual division of labour is persistently reinforced; gender hierarchy is maintained by propagating such representation and roles. Domestic ideology becomes a powerful means to strengthen the patriarchal domination through such teachings.

The protagonist of the story, Nisa, intends to break all the constraining walls, which limit women in their social roles. She wants to grow up having male roles rather than female roles, because this will provide her with more control in the public sphere. Nisa's status as a daughter is symbolic. All women are daughters, but not all are wives and mothers. Nisa's daughterhood acts as a representation of all women, because it shows that all women can be oppressed, but at the same time, it also shows that daughters can respond to unjust situations and demand their rights as though they were sons. Nisa's close relationship with her distant relative *Lek Khudhori* (Uncle Khudhori) contributes greatly to her striving for gender equality. From Khudhori, the young Nisa learns about the equality and justice that Islam ideally brings to its adherents. Khudhori satisfies Nisa's thirst for knowledge about women's history in Islam:

I was more and more yearning to learn *qira'ah* [to recite the Qur'an beautifully] and horse-back riding. I did them all with high spirit though secretly.... I spent all my free time exercising for horse-back riding, listening to the stories of the Prophet's wives, the forgotten queens of Islam and stories of female Sufis from *Lek Khudhori*. (2001: 24)

The passage above illustrates well Nisa's desire for education beyond domesticity. Her dream is to imitate Aisyah, the Prophet's youngest wife, who led an army in the Battle of Camel. Although Aisyah led the losing side, the fact that she did lead an army indeed captivated the young girl. For Nisa, Aisyah's heroism, and her ability to lead an army of men, conjure up images of an earlier Islam where women were given greater space in public life. Within these images, Nisa sees women's authenticity.

Not only does Nisa have an early education in the history of early Muslim women, she also has an interest in literature and poetry. Khudhori often recites the poems of famous poets, in particular those of Jalaluddin Rumi. Nisa also writes her own poems and sends them to Khudhori who is away at Al-Azhar, Cairo, for tertiary education. Imagination is a powerful ally for Nisa's struggles. Imagination enables her to create her own interpretations and thus fill the gaps in the collective memory of Islamic tradition, which, by and large, erases the presence of female Muslims in history. She begins her own interpretations at an early age by critically assessing *Surah At-Takwir* on female infanticide in pre-Islamic Quraishi culture:

How could they be called fathers? Or is it what they really are? Burying baby girls alive? Who are then their mothers? Who are their wives? Aren't they women themselves? Why don't they bury their wives alive as well? Sometimes I feel that father doesn't really love me. [Is it] because I am a girl? (2001: 43)

From an early age, Nisa criticizes the gender hierarchy that discriminates against girls in her environment, because of their sex. Her most essential effort is to defy her worst enemy – patriarchal domination – and achieve justice and equality. She persistently maintains her goal: to obtain her freedom. "Women are not men's servants. Nor are they slaves of life. I don't want to be a slave" (2001: 85).

Nisa's struggles are not without challenge. Soon after her graduation from elementary school, at the age of 12, she is forced into marriage with Samsudin, the son of a famous *kyai*. Forced marriage and child marriage are another form of subordination that Nisa has to undergo. Her struggle to be autonomous must necessarily be punished, as it deviates from the religious and social norms of the *pesantren* world. Samsudin, who is considered the black sheep of his family, comes from a devout *santri* family. He is a promiscuous young man, incapable of the upstanding behaviour expected of a *santri* gentleman. The narrative paints him as a monster: he abuses Nisa and frequently rapes her when she does not desire sexual intercourse. When Nisa protests about Samsudin's immoral behaviour to her family, they simply tell her that it is her responsibility to change him into a better person. Nisa is sacrificed and punished for attempting to express her own autonomy.

For Nisa, education is her way to cope with this unjust treatment. She focuses only on her education and ignores Samsudin's misbehaviour. Samsudin is outraged that Nisa ignores him and soon brings a woman, Kalsum, home as his second wife. Kalsum is a widow and far older than Samsudin. Although it is perhaps unusual for wives to share the same house in Indonesia, it sometimes happens in *pesantrens*. Samsudin's polygamous marriage is a relief for Nisa, as it releases her from her responsibilities as a wife: she accepts this practice gladly. She can now concentrate



more on her education, because Kalsum, being her helpful ally, takes over Nisa's responsibility for managing the household and fulfilling Samsudin's sexual needs. Kalsum also gives him a daughter, Fadillah. Here, Abidah gives polygamy a new face. The dynamic of polygamy is presented sympathetically when Abidah depicts it as a useful ally for Nisa in seeking her self-empowerment. Because Samsudin takes a second wife, Nisa can finish her education. However, Kalsum is also Samsudin's victim: his promise of material luxury, which seduced her, is a lie. A bond between Nisa and Kalsum is established when Kalsum shows interest in Nisa's education and asks Nisa to be her mentor on issues concerning women and Islam: sisterhood emerges between the two exploited women. Their bond is their response to the same threat, as they relate events and so come together in sorrow. It is also because of Nisa's teaching Kalsum that they can establish a sense of collective identity as women.

Education is central to this story. Lack of education is an essential contributing factor in women's victimization. Kalsum's lack of education, not knowing her rights as a wife, makes her an easy target for Samsudin's violence. Nisa's young age and her high school education are an inadequate basis for her to fight back against Samsudin's violence. In portraying this, Abidah shows that, within a *santri* family marriage, which is commonly perceived to be closest to Islamic ideals, domestic violence can take place. Abidah further questions gender bias in relation to the wife's responsibilities regulated in *kitab kuning* (the yellow book) and taught in *pesantren*. At school Nisa is taught that a wife will be cursed if she refuses her husband's desire for sexual intercourse. However, in her explanation to Kalsum on this matter, Nisa critically rebuffs such teaching, saying that it is obviously designed for men's benefit, and intentionally neglects women's own words on the subject. Nisa believes women's feelings need to be taken into account. Yet, is she prepared? Does she want to raise this problem? For Nisa, a husband's imposition of intercourse when the wife refuses is clearly an act of rape. Nisa's knowledge means nothing, however, because she has no power to stop Samsudin's violence. She is too young and too scared to defy her husband. Nisa's young age and Kalsum's ignorance indeed make them perfect subjects for further subjugation.

As Abidah expresses her discontent with child marriage and polygamy, these two seemingly perpetual problems Indonesian women have to deal with, she illustrates the hostile conditions in which women have to live. Abidah even goes further, saying that child marriage is largely due to patriarchal manipulation of what is termed *ijbar* (Arabic: "the act of forceful order") in Islamic *shari'a*. This is where a Muslim girl is subjected to the overruling power, or *ijbar*, of her father or guardian, supposedly in the interests of the girl herself. Through the story of Nisa, Abidah critically assesses *ijbar*. How could a girl 12 years of age know her own interest, particularly in the choice of husband? The most common interpretation of *ijbar* is when the father, or a guardian, asks a girl whether she approves of a certain person and if she keeps silent this means she agrees with the father's (or guardian's) choice. This is Nisa's experience. Her silence when she is asked, which demonstrates her ignorance, is simply perceived as her agreement. Through the voice of Nisa's uncle,

Khudhori, Abidah criticizes *ijbar*, because she believes that it is entirely against the spirit of autonomy in Islam. *Ijbar* should be located within certain contexts and conditions; it was never meant to be monolithically applicable in all circumstances.

Upon her graduation from high school at the age of 17, and encouraged by Khudhori who has returned from Egypt and Germany, Nisa finally agrees to speak about Samsudin's abuse to her parents. When matters are settled between her family and Samsudin's, she files for divorce. Being a young divorcee, she is subjected to public prejudice, in particular about her close relation to Khudhori. Determined to start a new life, however, and to pursue higher education, Nisa leaves her hometown for university education in Yogyakarta. A year later she marries Khudhori. Her second marriage is her escape from her *janda* (Indonesian: "a widow or divorcee") status, because she cannot bear the prejudicial societal treatment. With her marriage to Khudhori, who is a lecturer in Islamic studies, these prejudices soon disappear. Nisa gains what she has struggled for. Her activism on women's issues within an Islamic perspective is supported by Khudhori, and she becomes a strong supporter of the women's movement. Her feminist project is to help provide equality and justice for women who are subjugated through patriarchal domination, as happened in her own experience. Her marriage to Khudhori is an ideal one, each supporting the other in creating *sakinah mawaddah wa-rahmah* family ("a harmonious, peaceful, and affectionate family").

When their son Mahbub is 1 year old, however, Khudhori dies in a car accident. It is rumoured that Samsudin is responsible for the hit and run accident, which kills Khudhori, but the truth is never revealed in the story. Nisa herself believes that life and death are in the hands of the Creator. The death of Khudhori is a significant device in the story, for it reminds the readers that the kind of family life that Nisa and Khudhori have exists only at an ideal level (El Khalieqy 2004b).

Nisa's continued struggle for education is not easy, but she pursues education despite her circumstances. She is courageous, because she attempts to formulate interpretations of Islam from within the perspectives of women's experiences. In this story women become the central social actors. At first subjugated then empowered, women's social position is moved by Abidah from the periphery to the centre.

Abidah advocates women's rights within Islam, and specifically within the contexts of Islamic teaching, she highlights domestic violence, because it is regarded as being nonexistent in Islam. In this way Abidah creates a heroine who follows a course of action that constantly resists gender bias and who refuses to play the role of a slave victimized by patriarchy. The role of education is the central theme of the novel. This is because in addition to her explicit opinions on child and forced marriage, polygamy, and domestic violence, Abidah emphasizes the significance of education in resisting oppression based on conservative Islamic teachings. For Abidah, education functions as a means of achieving psychological independence, freeing women from oppression and providing room for emancipation. In this way Abidah's book is a challenging call against certain traditional Islamic practices, such as child and forced marriage and polygamy.

## Abidah and Reproductive Rights

These issues of reproductive rights are presented strongly in *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*. The novel is included among the few books published in Indonesia from 1990 to 2003 that are said to cover “all issues concerning women’s reproduction rights and women’s reproductive health, including violent acts and violations of women’s rights” (Abubakar 2002: 138). The story translates the issues of reproductive rights from their social and cultural context within the *pesantren* world. Abidah’s fictionalization of these issues proves to be more powerful and influential than if they were represented in more clinical terms, as the story relates to the life experiences of many women. In this section I would like to relate Abidah’s criticisms to the present situation of women in Indonesia.

A little background information is necessary to understand the issue of reproductive rights as they are understood in Islam in Indonesia. As part of their responsibilities as the vicegerents on earth, Muslims are adjured to ensure the survival of the human race through reproduction conducted through sexual relationships regulated within the sanction of marriage. Women, with their sole ability to bear children, are then central, for they are the entity linking the past and the future. Humankind relies on women’s bodies to secure the existence of future generations. In a society like Indonesia, however, where religious teaching regarding the power of a husband over a wife is very strong, a woman’s right over her own body is significantly disregarded. Her ownership and reproductive rights are denied, because the ability to control her own reproductive behaviour smacks self-determination and freedom from male authority – something that is anathema to men in most societies, let alone Indonesia. Women’s reproductive health is, by and large, dismissed from male politics.

Although recent developments have shown that many NGOs and women’s organizations are now strongly addressing reproductive rights, according to UNICEF, the maternal mortality rate and lifetime risk of maternal death are still high, because of the poor handling of women’s reproductive health (2005). To make matters worse, numerous aspects of women’s reproductive rights have intentionally been neglected by the Indonesian state, for example, abortion and infertility (Blackburn 2004: 115–62). Blackburn argues that it is difficult for women who fall pregnant against their will to secure an abortion, because there is no consensus on the issue. Religious objections create more difficulties for the state to sanction abortion based on women’s needs. Infertility is another problematic matter. In problems of infertility, the blame is simply placed on the woman, rather than on men, without really knowing the physical cause (2004: 162). In addition, despite the fact that leukorrhea,<sup>5</sup> commonly known as *keputihan*, can be a vital symptom of dangerous reproductive diseases, such as sexually transmitted diseases, the Ministry of Health fails to classify it as needing urgent attention (Kinasih 2004).

The lack of women’s awareness of the notion of “woman’s body, woman’s right” also contributes greatly to the failure to implement women’s reproductive rights. There is very little discourse about, or attention given to, the notion of the subject.

Religion is probably the most significant reason for this lack of attention. Traditional interpretations of Islam view women as half the value of men, and a woman's body is owned by the male lineage, exemplified exclusively with the *ijbar* right when she is single and her husband's control when she is married. A wife is subject to her husband's responsibility; thus, control over her body and integrity is in the hands of her husband. Who is the owner of a woman's body is certainly a problematic issue. The notion of "woman's body, woman's right" implies authority and therefore the right for women to control their bodies, sexuality, and reproductive organs. For most men, support of this position would definitely jeopardize their control over women. Thus, it is not so surprising that there is very little discourse about, or attention given to, the subject of reproductive rights.

These issues of reproductive rights are presented strongly in *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*. It articulates women's own concerns and turns their concerns into an informative teaching method as, for instance, when Nisa tells her relative, *Lek Ummi* (Aunt Ummi), about women's reproductive rights:

Caring for children is the husband's responsibility.... Also, for example if *Lek Ummi* refuses to breastfeed the baby because the household load is too heavy, *Lek Mahmud* [*Lek Ummi's* husband] is obligated to find a surrogate mother whom he'll pay well enough. These are the husband's responsibility, *Lek*.... You mean, you don't know if you have the right to decide whether you want to get pregnant or not, *Lek*? (El Khalieqy 2001: 259)

Abidah's story presents important reproductive rights issues: domestic responsibilities are to be shared by both husband and wife; the wife has the right to her body; she has the right to decide whether to have a baby. On other occasions, Abidah, through the voice of Nisa, speaks of a wife's right to initiate and enjoy sexual intercourse with her husband. Although this might seem odd to most Indonesian Muslims, as only men may initiate sexual relations, Abidah directly voices her feminist views on the issue of sexual rights. Nevertheless, she always bears in mind that sexual relationships are only to take place within marriage.

In fact reproductive rights are not new in Islamic law. Classical books on *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) have regulated such issues, ranging from sexual relations to childbearing. According to K. H. Sahal Mahfudz, classical religious interpretations of such rights place women at the centre (2002: 113–18). Verses in the Qur'an secure these rights: husbands are responsible for treating their wives with respect, and women, due to their childbearing ability, deserve to receive this respectful treatment (*Al Qur'an dan Terjemahnya* 2001: *Surah* Al-Nisa verse 19 and *Surah* Luqman verse 14). Islam says that because of their so-called reproduction burden, women are given exemption in their vicegerent responsibilities, particularly in the matter of *ibadah* (worshipping). However, Kyai Sahal reminds us that the practicality of those verses is far from the accepted ideal in most Muslim communities. Women's reproductive rights often exist only on a rhetorical level and are never actually applied at the practical level. As Abidah's work reveals, efforts to raise women's awareness of their reproductive rights are still needed to help them finally reach the ideal goal of just and equal Islamic communities.

## Abidah on Gender-Based Violence: Domestic Violence

In her novel, Abidah also raises one of the most contested issues in contemporary Muslim feminists' struggle against violence against women. To a certain degree, most female characters in the story suffer from gender-based violence, whether direct or indirect, physical or mental. Abidah's attack on patriarchal subjugation exposes marital rape, a term only recently used by the Muslim feminist movement. Nisa, her co-wife Kalsum, her relative *Lek Umami*, and even her mother reflect the situation of many Muslim women who are taught that anytime a husband wants sexual intercourse with his wife, even if she is not ready, or willing, his wife should never refuse. The practice has long been uncritically accepted due to an interpretation of a Qur'anic verse, which states that a husband has "the right" to beat his wife if she is found to be *nusyuz* (disobedient) (*Al Qur'an dan Terjemahnya* 2001: Surah An-Nisa verse 4). The term *nusyuz* has long been subject to debate in Islamic communities. Conservative interpretations believe that this verse endorses a husband to be the sole controller and owner of his wife, including the right to "punish" her in case of *nusyuz*. Modern and gender-equal interpretations of this term demand contextual readings of this verse. If it is not to be abolished, just like the abolition of slavery, *nusyuz* is only applicable under special conditions. Hussein Muhammad reasons that most violence against women in Muslim societies is basically an extension of this verse (2002: 203–12). Such violence, however, is against the Islamic ideals of protecting five basic human rights in the perspective of modern interpretations of Islam: rights to have religion, to live, to think, to reproduction, and to possession of property (Mahfudz 2002: 114). Hussein Muhammad argues further that theological dogma, which says that man's authority over woman is natural, needs to be reformed and reconstructed in order to be more gender equal, which is indeed the basic of Islamic ideals. Marriage is a contract based on equality and justice, and relations between husband and wife are not to be based on hierarchical power relations.

The fact that Abidah addresses gender-based violence in her novel is indeed crucial, because many studies conducted by NGOs on women's issues have shown that reporting of gender-based violence, especially domestic violence, has increased due to the rise in awareness of such issues. Rifka Annisa, an NGO specializing in women's issues in Yogyakarta, recently published its research on domestic violence in Central Java. Its findings are noteworthy, because they show that domestic violence, whether physical, sexual, or emotional, which was previously regarded as nonexistent, was experienced by many women in the research area (Mohammad et al. 2001).<sup>6</sup> Violence from a partner was the most common form of domestic violence:

Women are at the greatest risk of violence from their husbands; one in every four women in our sample had been sexually or physically abused by a partner. Sexual violence was more common than physical violence, with one in five women reporting sexual violence (i.e., being forced to have sex against their will ensuing physical force or threats), whereas one in ten women experienced physical violence from a husband at some point in their lives. (2001: 77)

On 14 September 2004, the Indonesian government enacted *Undang-Undang*, No. 23 tahun 2004 called as *Undang-Undang Penghapusan Kekerasan Dalam Rumah Tangga* (PKDRT – Abolition of Domestic Violence Act). This act aims to give legal protection for women from violence occurring within domestic walls. The act, however, does not automatically guarantee a more women-friendly environment. The Javanese idea of harmony might hamper the implementation of this act. Many women victims of partner violence are still reluctant to report their suffering, because Javanese ethics, reinforced by traditional Islamic interpretation of women's duties, emphasize harmony within the family at all cost. Women are burdened with their duty to be loyal to their husbands even though their well-being is at stake, and many women choose silence over reporting violence to the police for the sake of a harmonious household (Mohammad et al. 2001: 85). Indonesian women, irrespective of ethnic, religious, cultural, or social backgrounds, are thus all at risk of being victimized by domestic violence. Indeed, some cultural and religious norms even encourage a tolerant attitude to gender-based violence, as well as encourage silence in the face of abuse.

## Conclusion

Abidah's novel, *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*, remarkably raises these issues in the context of women and Islam, placing such issues at the heart of women's everyday life. In a realistic manner, Abidah writes about previously taboo issues, such as marital rape and domestic violence. She brings them to public notice and openly seeks to educate her readers, hoping that they will come to understand that any violence is intolerable. Abidah understands that any violence in the name of Islam is un-Islamic. It is this drastic change in awareness that Abidah hopes to accomplish.

Abidah's gift – showing that Islam indeed can open the door widely for its adherents to speak their minds in response to the authoritative discourse restricting and denying Muslims their rights – is well expressed in her novel, *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*. Through her novel, she raises issues that previously were rarely recognized or, rather, largely suppressed by mainstream male interpretations of women's rights in Islam.

In breaking silence and giving voice to women, she has indeed created “a feminist novel.” Her gift to Indonesian women readers is narrated through the portrayal of women voicing their rights in the private sphere where women are mostly considered as a silent majority. She takes ethical and moral positions and is eloquent on the project of cultural transformation, of establishing new values, which support justice and equality. As a revisionist writer, refusing to keep silent, she replaces heroes with heroines and revises the stories of grand heroic figures with stories of ordinary women. In this way, Abidah El Khaliqy celebrates the experiences of female survival that can be found in the different responses women have enacted in their specific historical situations.

## Notes

1. Indonesia has the largest Muslim population in the world, and Muslims in Indonesia are predominantly Sunni following Syafi'i *madhab* (school). There are minorities of other Islamic schools such as Ahmadiyah and Shi'ah often accused to be un-Islamic and also syncretism between indigenous religions and Islam existing throughout Indonesia. One might find that in Indonesia on one hand, there are radical Muslims, but on the other there are many more progressive Muslims who believe in democracy, civil society, human rights, and equality of women. Indeed, Indonesian Islam is still mostly moderate.
2. In this paper, Abidah El Khalieqy will be addressed using her first name, as she is usually called.
3. *Pesantren* are Islamic boarding schools managed by Muslim clerics, or *kyai* (Indonesian, meaning Islamic male clerics). *Pesantren* is segregated between male and female boarding schools. Students of *pesantren* are called *santri* or *santriwan* (male *santri*) and *santriwati* (female *santri*). It is common that *kitab kuning* (Indonesian, meaning yellow books) are taught in the *pesantren*. *Kitab kuning* are classical books recording exegeses and explications of Islamic teachings by *ulama* of premodern schools of thoughts. Although secular Muslims apparently do not use such *kitab* (books), for *santri* (students of *pesantren*) and their surrounding communities, such books are very popular.
4. Taslima Nasreen (age 48) is a Bangladeshi feminist, an author, a poet, and a human rights activist who has published fiction (novels and short stories), poems, and articles that are mostly banned in Bangladesh and India. She was born and raised in a Muslim family but in a secular environment. Since 1994, she has been living in exile after she received death threats from Muslim fundamentalists because of her feminist views and strong criticisms of Islam in the region. Since then she has been famously known to write about secular humanism, equality for women, freedom of thinking, and human rights through publications, lectures, and campaigns. For detailed information, please visit her website: *The Official Website of Taslima Nasreen* at <http://taslimanasrin.com>.
5. Leukorrhea may occur at any age and affects most women. It is a non-blood vaginal discharge, which may be normal or represent minimal pathological changes from various causes. Leukorrhea during mature periods, before or after menstruation, or during pregnancy without any other symptoms or odour is a normal vaginal discharge. Once it is persistent and accompanied by other symptoms, such as pain and itchiness, then it may be a pathological reaction, an early symptom of more serious diseases, such as reproductive organ diseases or liver, kidney, and heart disorders. See [http://www.martha-tilaar.com/indo/perlutahu/perlutahu\\_07.shtml](http://www.martha-tilaar.com/indo/perlutahu/perlutahu_07.shtml).
6. The research sample was 13,094 women at their reproductive age of 15–49 years. The research area was Purworejo District in Central Java.



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# Chapter 3

## An Epic Cry for Autonomy: Philosophical and Ethical Thinking in a Daoist Woman's Ecstatic Excursions

Jinfen Yan

### Introduction: Lady Wang and Her Poem, *The Complaint*

Enlightenment can be conveyed equally well in verse as in prose, and, in some women's poems, perhaps it can be conveyed uniquely well. Poems by women often express emotional richness and sensitivities about their lives, but few have been respected for their philosophical reflections on the universe and on human nature. It is even rarer for them to be esteemed for ethical investigations of "how one should live" in relation to other human beings.<sup>1</sup> Lady Wang's *The Complaint* explores these topics in the style of a Daoist "ecstatic excursion" in her search for autonomy and integrity. "Ecstatic excursion" is a concept that covers various Daoist visionary and transcendent meditation skills and mystical experiences. In a sense, her description of this journey was her gift to future generations. But her writing has only just begun to attract the attention it deserves. In this paper I will reflect on the life and work of Lady Wang as an exemplar of an exceptional female philosopher who sought to understand the meaning and purpose of her existence in a society that did not support such an initiative.

*The Complaint* could be regarded as an encyclopedic epic of Southern Song (1127–1279 CE) and Jin (1115–1234 CE) times, a complex period when the humiliated Confucian Song government was threatened by the Jurchen Jin, whose continued expansion forced the Song to move its capital to the south, forming the weaker government of Southern Song in 1127. It was a time of constant warfare, marked by much religious syncretism, rapid economic growth, and innovative political reforms. The philosophical establishment was that of neo-Confucianism, which involved an increased cultural Sinicization; that is, the Jurchen Jin consciously accepted Confucian culture and thought. This study emerges from research on and the whole

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translation of this newly acclaimed “longest classical poem in Chinese history” (Liu 1996). Unfortunately, it had been ignored by scholars until the end of the twentieth century.

The present version of *The Complaint* appears in a five-volume nonpoetic text, *Guidong*, which is full of strange stories and myths describing mystical experiences. This work had puzzled scholars as to its genre. If you read it carefully following the short narrative introduction, however, you can easily recognize the classical poetic style and the luminous clarity of the thought. *The Complaint*, with its rhymed verses, was easy to remember and chant—much like the *Lotus Sutra*. An important reason for the rich philosophical contents of *The Complaint* was the flourishing character of philosophical studies at that time. Confucian philosophers challenged Buddhist and Daoist metaphysics and cosmology, and various new schools competed to develop and rebuild Chinese philosophy. Different aspects of these teachings are reflected in the writings of Lady Wang.

Little is known of Lady Wang other than her surname. She lived in Julu County, which was then occupied by the Jin “barbarian” government. Her discussion of the “recent” anti-Jin hero, Yue Fei (1103–1142), is the only clue identifying her era. The claim to her authorship of *The Complaint* relies on three facts: Firstly, there is no reason to doubt the words of the author of the *Guidong*, Mr. Shen,<sup>2</sup> who lived from 1162 to 1225 CE, though the presence of mythical elements may provide grounds for some suspicion of his interventions in the poem. His introduction states:

Lady Wang lived in Julu (in present Hebei province). She was beautiful with graceful manners though her family was poor. A young man, Ling, of a gentry family, lived in the same prefecture and took her as his concubine.<sup>3</sup> Ling’s first wife was jealous and began to wait for a chance to do something malicious. One day, when Ling had gone out, she ordered her maidservant to tie up Lady Wang with ropes and throw her into a deep abyss. By chance she managed to break the ropes and escap(ed). She wandered to another prefecture [of China] and became a Daoist nun. She then wrote a poem, *The Complaint*, which consisted of more than two thousand words. One night she mystically placed it before Ling in his dream. She told him about her tragic history and offered him her poem as a keepsake. When Ling awoke from his dream he found the poem beside his pillow. Later, when Ling’s first wife died, Lady Wang was reunited with Ling. Once I [Mr. Shen] heard the story about Lady Wang, I felt incredible and was eager to read the poem. Somebody in my neighborhood heard my plea and passed it to me. I recorded it here. (*Guidong* 1: 7)

Secondly, *The Complaint* reflects feminine preoccupations with creative aesthetic, psychological, and poetic expressions that have ethical and philosophical implications. It could be regarded as a feminine clarification of the nature of *yin* or *kun* (the Earth, the dark, yielding, female, absorbing, resilient, nurturing, and primal receptive cosmic power), with a complementary exploration on *yang* or *qian* (the Heaven, the creative cosmic power and all essence that are not in *yin*). In the *Book of Changes*, *yin* is symbolized by six broken lines while *yang* by six unbroken lines. The basic texts of the *Book of Changes* are attributed to very ancient times when divinations guided people’s actions in the Shang dynasty (before the twelfth century BCE).<sup>4</sup> Lady Wang’s interpretation is, indeed, a celebratory feminine point of view of Yin-Yang doctrine. She creatively uses the concept beauty (*li*) to clarify aesthetical, psychological, ethical, and metaphysical elements in human nature. In Chinese

history Mencius was the first who explicitly claimed that human nature is originally good. Influenced by multi-philosophical traditions of her time, especially, neo-Confucian thought in the Four Books,<sup>5</sup> Lady Wang independently thinks that human nature is not only good but also beautiful. In her view, human nature has two aspects, *yin* and *yang*, and they are both definitely beautiful. Her feminine attitude toward human nature refined the masculine concept of *yin*. In this connection, it is important to note that the ending of Mr. Shen's introduction is different from that in Lady Wang's version. His introduction celebrates the triumph of Confucian morality and the value of family. He reunites Lady Wang with her husband. In contrast, in Lady Wang's own narrative of *The Complaint*, she chooses Daoist ultimate freedom—"ascending to Heaven" or achieving immortality—by means of an ecstatic journey. Therefore, because of the quite different endings, it is very unlikely that the poem was written by Mr. Shen.

Thirdly, Daoist nuns mainly came from the daughters, deserted wives, or concubines of gentry or royal families, some of them might have been prostitutes. They were often well educated, especially in the composition of poems (Jiang, Xiaoyuan 1995: 89).<sup>6</sup> *The Complaint* is special because poems from the Jin period are much less numerous than those from the Tang dynasty and usually shorter. It shows that some women thought philosophically and wrote in the manner of the great neo-Confucian philosopher Zhu Xi (1130–1200). This scholar established the Dao learning, which synthesized Daoist and Buddhist metaphysics with Confucianism. His teaching dominated Chinese and East Asian thought for at least eight centuries after his death. Unfortunately, few of such women's writings remain extant. In this paper, I will focus on concepts of ecstatic excursion, ethical and philosophical thinking, and autonomy as the central elements and themes that feature in Lady Wang's *The Complaint*.

## The Ecstatic Excursion and Subjective Transcendence

It is necessary to clarify early in this paper that Laozi and the work, *Daodejing/Laozi*, which is attributed to him, have been highly respected by both Daoist philosophers and religious Daoist practitioners. (Often scholars attempt to distinguish Daoist philosophy from Daoist religion.<sup>7</sup>) Metaphysically, "Dao produced the One, the One produced two" (*Laozi* 42). This "two" is often interpreted as the cosmic powers, *yin* and *yang*. Religiously, *yin* and *yang* could also be personified as gods or represented by talismans.

The Ecstatic Excursion that is discussed in this paper is more about religious Daoism. The Daoist Ecstatic Excursion is also called the "distant excursion," "ecstatic journey," or "journeying to Heaven."<sup>8</sup> These words are various ways of describing the Daoist mystical quest for attaining the ultimate ideal of immortality. The Maoshan-Shangqing religious Daoist School teaches this visionary and transcendent experience as one of its meditation skills. This leads the meditator to feel lightness as well as a movement toward transcendence that is described as a

sensation of flying freely in the beyond.<sup>9</sup> In the meditator's quest for truth, "he goes as far away as the poles to encounter supernatural beings who will give him instructions (either a scripture or a method) and the nourishment or elixir of immortality" (Robinet 1993: 171; 174). In fact, this practice is encouraged by the book of *Zhuangzi* and by other works of Daoist literature, such as "The Far-off Journey" of the *Chuci*, and ancient Chinese myths, such as the *Shanhaijing*.<sup>10</sup> It is a highly individual affair. One is in a locked meditation chamber, in an extremely quiet cave, or at the top of a cliff on certain mountains. The aim is to transport the meditator from the sufferings of this world into the realm of the immortals, so as to enjoy ultimate physical and mental freedom.

The practice has three steps: First, there is the cultivation of a capacity for visualization, with a belief that the visualization occurs in the mind. Second, there is an association of subjective, romantic, and mystical images of the beyond that arise with certain physical experiences. Finally, there is the ingestion of a highly poisonous alchemical elixir of immortality, which results in the ascension to Heaven.<sup>11</sup> By the end of *The Complaint*, Lady Wang will have taken all three steps, using a method of concentrated meditation together with a form of critical thinking that seeks truth, which is similar in form, though different in nature, from the pure religious Daoist meditation techniques performed by shamans aiming at attaining the *Dao*.<sup>12</sup>

The Maoshan-Shangqing school, whose meditational method Lady Wang employs, emerged to redefine and eventually overshadow the teaching of the Celestial Masters School, which was the first school of religious Daoism. This original school began in present-day Sichuan province, based on revelations presented by the deified Laozi to Zhang Daoling in 142 CE. This disciplined form was different from other Daoist organizations of the Eastern Han (25 BCE–220 CE). It engaged mainly in religious activities and managed to survive by attracting followers from the lower classes. Later it became orthodox religious Daoism. The founder of the Maoshan-Shangqing school was Lady Wei Huacun (252–334 CE), who lived in Jurong and had died about 30 years before her successor Yang Xi (305–386 CE). She appeared with other immortals during Yang's midnight meditations. Yang thus became the second patriarch of the school but is now regarded as the real founder of the Maoshan-Shangqing School for his recording of his mystical experiences.

## Philosophical Teachings and Reflection as Presented in *The Complaint*

The reason why Lady Wang wanted to become a Daoist nun was different from that of the Daoist patriarch, Yang Xi. Lady Wang, as a thinker, did not make a free choice to leave society, as he did. In reality, it was a choice imposed on her because she did not have any real alternatives, as is related in Mr. Shen's introduction and in *The Complaint* itself.

An analysis of Lady Wang's knowledge of moral philosophy and her psychology helps to appreciate her choices (Anscombe 1997: 26). To do this, I will follow Lady Wang's story as she relates it in *The Complaint*. First, Lady Wang naturally turns to her parents for help when she escapes from immediate danger in the wilderness. After they do not help her, she starts her visualization exercises, mixed with self-reflective thinking. These will then lead to the beginning of her ecstatic or mystical journey. Firstly, she recalls her maidenhood at home. There she had learned to play musical instruments and could trill sweet melodies as well as play masterpieces on strings. She was thus well prepared to be a wife or concubine for a gentry family—a life-style for girls of her time. (At that time, it was common for educated Chinese men who were forty or older to take at least one concubine.<sup>13</sup>) Girls became concubines in different ways. Lady Wang attracted her husband Ling through her beauty and talent at music and composing poetry and was sent to him by her parents in return for dowry. Some girls were presented as gifts for different purposes.<sup>14</sup> It was also the custom in a Confucian society, when a daughter escaped from her husband's family, that a mother had to send her back to her husband's home, even if she knew that her daughter had done nothing wrong. If her daughter could not serve her husband's family well, it was a shame of the mother because it was the mother's duty to teach her daughter her duties. The mother's love was always expressed with *yan* (a strict teaching) rather than *qing* (a protective consolation).

Secondly, in trying to understand what has happened to her, Lady Wang undertook a moral self-examination. She asks herself if she is a virtuous woman. She compares herself with the exemplary Confucian women in a temple of the deified Confucian woman moralist, Ban Zhao,<sup>15</sup> in order to discover the cause of her tragedy. Lady Wang comes to believe that her own virtue, obedience, and chastity are all equal to that of the female exemplars (O'Hara 1971; Raphals 1998). She also silences voices deep within herself in order to restrain and ignore any thoughts of self-importance and conceit. This illustrates her conscious efforts to expand her awareness from a purely subjective viewpoint to that of objective evaluation. She then reflects from this perspective on what she can do, given the limitations of her society with respect to women. In doing this, Lady Wang gains psychological insight that will challenge the moral demands of her society. Nonetheless, it seems that becoming a nun is the decision that is most in keeping with her personal integrity. (In reality, perhaps she had no other choice.)

Thirdly, Lady Wang questions whether some preexisting reason has caused this family tragedy. She then consults a Buddhist nun. She drops two half-moon-shaped wood divination pieces (*Yuanjiao*) that augur or foretell the future for whoever drops them. Usually, believers throw the pieces on the floor, and then soothsayers observe their position. They then interpret whether this indicates a good or ill fortune according to the *Book of Changes* or other ritual instructions. This practice is often seen in Daoist temples (*guan*), but here Lady Wang does it in a temple (*ci*) of a deified Confucian woman moralist, and an old Buddhist nun (*ni*) interprets it. The nun carefully reads her fate from the wood pieces on the ground and foresees auspicious signs of duty, purity, and a long life that will come to her. The nun states that because Lady Wang has followed the teachings of the gods (Buddhist and Daoist)

and sages (Confucian), her wish will be bestowed as a reward according to Buddhist *karma*. This answer, however, does not satisfy Lady Wang. What she really wants is the complete liberation of her body and soul.

Finally, hunger, coldness, sadness, helplessness, and eagerness to know her destiny, as well as the desire to be liberated, make Lady Wang fall into a trance that indicates the state of an ecstatic excursion. Drifting from the temple, she is astonished to see the Immortal Old Mother of Lishan.<sup>16</sup> Lady Wang meekly asks the Old Immortal Mother for her insight. The Mother performs a divination for her upon the sand, employing stalks (*baimao*) and the *Book of Changes*. The hexagram Sun, meaning Decrease, is the answer. (The upper trigram of the hexagram is “mountain” (*gen*), while the lower trigram reveals “lake” (*dui*) 1988.) This means that one must reduce the degree of one’s vanity and let go of unhappy thoughts and feelings. The hexagram Sun, taken as a whole, calls for the sacrifice of all forms of self-importance, which occur when one feels forced into a seemingly impossible situation. Such emotions can cloud one’s perception, and even though they may be justified, harbouring them prevents one from attaining a correct point of view (Wilhelm and Baynes 1966: 169–73; Anthony 1988: 131–34). Humbly, Lady Wang accepts the teaching as well as the Immortal Mother’s gifts of jade pins and flowers. She also inhales her ambrosia healing vapour (*qi*) and feels her mortal bones infused with purity. Then, with a second breath of the vapour, her tired spleen is thoroughly cleansed. “I want to be your disciple!” she implores the Immortal Mother and *kowtows* to her. But no sooner does Lady Wang look up from her *kowtow* than the Immortal Mother vanishes. Lady Wang then banishes all attachments to earthly values from her mind. She meditates continuously, seeking to become identical with the Dao. Every day, she eats the wild fruits of the lotus (*durou*) and the waterweeds (*jiangli*). She wears chrysanthemums for a pendant and a scarf of orchids adorns her hair, with fragrant *xun* and *hui* flowers also woven through her coiling tresses. Singing and dancing, she now feels young and energetic. She washes her hands and face in a clean spring and feels that her heart and mind are purified from selfish mortal stains. This is the feminine, optimistic, and romantic part of her life. Lady Wang is thus temporarily released both physically and spiritually from her trials.

But Lady Wang’s enlightenment was not yet to be. Her temporary experience of happiness as a recluse in the wild soon ends. Her thoughts and feelings prevent her from keeping her mind tranquil and peaceful. She misses her husband and longs for an ordinary married women’s life. She wants to be the sole wife and a mother, rather than share her husband with other women. Such thoughts are the source of her criticisms of the moral demands of her society. She then visits her husband’s house, from which she was expelled, and where she now wants to return. While she was in the wilderness, Lady Wang had prepared various gifts that only a woman could provide him with. It is because she has been unable to share these gifts with her husband, however, that she decides to eschew immortality and to visit her husband’s house again—only to be rebuffed once more. Thus, all her efforts are fruitless and only increase her suffering. Unable to accept this fact, she attempts to commit suicide but does not succeed.



To express all of these feelings, Lady Wang writes a poem to her husband. She then visits him in his dream to present this poem, *The Complaint*, to him. (This mode of doing things in a dream is a mystical convention in Daoism to fulfill one's desire when something is impossible to realize in life.) But it is the denial of her social status that is the main reason that now drives her to again continue her ecstatic excursion in search of the truth of her destiny. Her extreme sadness and helplessness and her lack of a voice increase her desire to see the reality of the high heavens.

Ultimately, at the end of *The Complaint*, Lady Wang cuts off all worldly attachments to what she could not obtain in this world and ascends to Heaven. By now, she has completed every step advocated by Maoshan-Shangqing Daoism and has reflected seriously on the reasons for her choice. Her mystical experience gives her reason to believe that she has attained the truth for which she had searched.

If I were to stop my study of Lady Wang here, however, and only present Lady Wang's account of her life as described in *The Complaint*, the achievement of her systematic philosophical and ethical inquiry would not be fully appreciated. It is this aspect of her work that I would now like to examine in more detail.

## Ethical and Metaphysical Thinking in *The Complaint*

In search for the truth of her destiny, Lady Wang questions the way of Heaven and the order of the universe.<sup>17</sup> In Daoist metaphysics, Heaven, Earth, and humanity are all originally produced by the Dao, and, therefore, the Dao is in the cosmic state of *yin* and of the great One: "It may be considered the mother of the universe" (*Laozi*: 25; W-T. Chan 1963: 152).

Initially, Lady Wang, like most of the people of her time, believed in a personal authority—Heaven—that represents the Dao or Way of taking care of humans, including her:

I happen upon the foreboding caves  
Where tigers and wolves drag their hapless prey,  
And flee at hearing their distant, famished groans  
For they would tear my flesh disgorge my bones.  
Forlorn and cold, how could I not fear?  
I lift my head that all Heaven might hear,  
And crying out with the strength I yield:  
Oh, Heaven, where is your sheltering shield?<sup>18</sup>

Unfortunately, however, she finds that Heaven does not help. She attempts to obtain help from the Earth, but with the same result.

Turning to Heaven, I implore once more,  
But alas no answer is given, nor  
When the Earth I ask, silent I am left  
For of wisdom too is the Earth bereft.

Lady Wang's state of utter bereftness illustrates the notion of *wuwei* (nonaction) that is the function of the Dao: "The sage (nature), manages affairs without action, and

spreads doctrines without words” (*Laozi*: 2). The idea of *wuwei* is also a Confucian way of teaching, in which a sage-king acts and becomes the model for the human world. The counterpart of this sage-king in the natural world is the mandate of Heaven: “What does heaven ever say? But the four seasons are put in motion by it” (*Analects* 15: 5; 17: 19).<sup>19</sup>

Secondly, Lady Wang has believed that Heaven is just and thus makes moral judgments objectively. This would mean that the operation of Heaven as the Way (*Dao*) of nature or reason should distinguish wrong from right and bring about the perfection of all beings. But her adverse experiences lead her to question this view:

Who says heaven is a wide, open space  
When I cannot rest my limbs any place?  
Who says the sun and moon are radiant fair,  
The two luminous orbs that rule the air,  
When they rise and set having shed no lights  
Upon human selfishness or mortal plights?

Thirdly, her awareness of equality stems from her understanding of the Way (*Dao*) of Heaven and the operation of Heaven as nature being manifested as dew and rain. She describes how Heaven/nature as a giver should distribute its grace justly by considering the needs of all recipients in this world equally. This implies not only the distribution of material goods in social life but also the distribution of compassion to everyone who deserves it. Equality, here, is conditioned by fairness and justice. Again, Lady Wang questions if this has been the case for her.

Neither does dew nor rain equally quench  
The thirst of all plants that do pine and wrench,  
So who says grace is fairly poured  
Equally upon the peoples of this world?  
Pausing a moment for undeserved rest,  
I wonder if Heaven will hear this inquest.

Obviously, Lady Wang’s thinking does not separate the probing of metaphysical truth from the probing of practical virtue. This is also a feature of neo-Confucian metaphysics. Neo-Confucianism differs from classical Confucianism in that it introduced new relationships between morality and metaphysics. Confucian doctrine had to be tailored to make it acceptable to new recipients who were steeped in Buddhism and Daoism. In this revised doctrine, what is human is also understood as having transcendental implications. Through sincerity (*cheng*), the human mind (*renxin*) can fully actualize its potential and transcend itself so as to become the site of the metaphysical principle. This amounts to the idea of the mind as the Way (*dioxin*)—the moral essence of the universe. The Great Ultimate (*Taiji*), the subject of Principle (*Li*) metaphysics, is thus humanly actualized by an individual’s self-cultivation and self-reformation. This approach points directly to a specific answer to the perennial question of moral philosophy: How should one live? Lady Wang speculates that:

The Great Ultimate (*Taiji*) primeval furnace,  
Whose power is the primordial cosmic force,  
Incandescent, with energy engorged,

*Yin* and *Yang* like two divine hammers forge;  
 In their kilns are humans silently born,  
 And all other things, taking shape and form,  
 Smelt and fused within the universal whole  
 Yet still bequeathed with beautiful soul/li.  
 The original good human nature,  
 Was made to correct our evil mistakes,  
 So those who indulge in calumny  
 Choose to revel in their deficiency.

The Great Ultimate (*Taiji*) is one of the most important concepts in Daoism and Confucianism. The *Taiji* here is identical with the notion of *Taiji* in the *Book of Changes* as the origin and source of all things in the universe and the ultimate source of reality. It is said that in the changes of all things, *Taiji* gives rise to the two norms of *yin* and *yang*; these two norms then give rise to the four forms; and the four forms give rise to the eight trigrams. All things are based on or derived from the eight trigrams, whose different combinations comprise all the 64 hexagrams of the *Book of Changes* (Appendix A: 11).

This doctrine, as well as its Daoist interpretations, influenced many neo-Confucian philosophers, such as Zhou Dunyi (1017–1073 CE) and Zhu Xi (1130–1200 CE) among others. Lady Wang's ethico-metaphysical ideas, as expressed in *The Complaint*, are actually a kind of condensed interpretation of Zhou Dunyi's "Explanation of the Diagram of the Great Ultimate (*Taijitushuo*)." (Zhou is credited particularly with making a sound argument for the inseparability of ethics and metaphysics in Chinese philosophy.) From the context of the poem, it can be discerned that Lady Wang understands the universe as a moving organic entity with no beginning and no end. It is empty but not mere nonexistence, which subsisted before the existence of *yin* and *yang* and Heaven and Earth. As Zhou stated in his "Explanation": "The Ultimate of Non-being is also the Great Ultimate (*Taiji*). The *Taiji*, through movement, generates *yang*. When its activity reaches its limit, it becomes tranquil. Through tranquility the *Taiji* generates *yin*" (Zhou Dunyi 1937; Book 1: 2). Then, by the transformation of *yang* and its union with *yin*, the Five Agents of metal, wood, water, fire, and earth arise. When these five material forces are distributed in harmonious order, the four seasons run their course, with the result that Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things in the universe appear. In this process, humans alone receive the Five Agents in their highest excellence. As a result, their physical form appears and the Five Moral Principles of their nature (humanity, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and faithfulness) "are aroused by, and react to, the external world and engage in activity; good and evil are distinguished; and human affairs take place" (Zhou Dunyi 1937; Book 1: Chapters 1–2).

By using metaphor and analogy, Lady Wang conveys the metaphysical conceptions of *Taiji*, *yin*, and *yang* and the cosmological and ethical transformation of human nature. She concretizes these concepts by naturalizing them in terms of material things in daily life. She vividly depicts them with the forms, shapes, appearances, and characters of imaginary sounds, colours, and lights—thus *Taiji* is like the great grand furnace of the universe. The term "great" is used to denote its positive productive energy. The term "grand" is to describe its indescribable infinite and

all-inclusive embrace. The term “furnace” conveys heat, passion, enthusiasm, sunlight, and a huge container for the Five Agents or elements (water, wood, metal, fire, and earth).<sup>20</sup> All of these are then transformed so that human beings and all things in the universe are produced. *Yin* and *yang*, like two divinely wielded hammers, rise one after another. In this way, humankind and all things in the universe are silently forged and transformed in the furnace of *Taiji*. They are mixed and blended as part of the great whole or One, while each also turns into a being with its own natural excellence and beauty (*li*). In *The Complaint*, Lady Wang depicts the whole procedure of the manner in which *yang* unites with *yin* and the way that Heaven, Earth, the four seasons, and all the myriad things that exist are produced and reproduced. This process continues in an unending ethico-metaphysical transformation through the mysterious union of all that constitutes the reality of the *Taiji*.

## Human Nature Is Good and Beautiful (*li*)

Lady Wang’s philosophy of human nature depicts aesthetics, ethics, and metaphysics as inseparable. She explains that humans and the myriad things are each mixed beings because, through changes, each one turns into a being with natural beauty. The use of beauty (*li*) rather than virtue (*shan*), right (*zheng*), purity (*chun*), or truth (*zhen*) shows the preferences of a woman. *Li* here denotes an idea of beauty that embraces beautiful beings in a number of ways: aesthetically, morally, and metaphysically. Metaphysical beauty is the innate nature of a being conceived as perfection and received from *Taiji/Dao* by every being. On the one hand, their beauty is first and foremost an intrinsic value, that is, it is valuable for its own sake and not for the sake of anything further. It also has an agent-neutral value. That is, it is equally valuable for each and every individual as a moral agent (Sumner 1987: 165; 170). It impartially addresses not only the original beauty of human beings but also the beauty of each and every being. On the other hand, nature as beauty is beautiful in itself and assuredly perfect; it is true, pure, right, and good. Such is Lady Wang’s logic as it is expressed in the poem.

Her intention is to demonstrate how aesthetic value turns into epistemological or prudential value and then, finally, into ethical value. Lady Wang, like most neo-Confucian moralists, distinguishes humans from other beings and thus gives human nature and ethics a metaphysical foundation. In doing this, however, Lady Wang does not cast aside her feminine mode of expression, adding beauty (*li*) to the five virtues or Five Moral Principles of human nature listed in Zhou Dunyi’s *Explanation*. These, as mentioned above, are humanity, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and faithfulness.<sup>21</sup> Lady Wang’s discussion thus follows the neo-Confucian philosophical tendency of her time in giving ethics a metaphysical foundation. It takes the metaphysical principles of *Taiji* and *Li* (Principle) as the substance of human nature. Morality is the application and actualization of these metaphysical principles. This is in keeping with Zhou Dunyi’s philosophy on the relation between cosmology and ethics and also with Zhu Xi’s saying, “The Great Ultimate is nothing other

than Principle (*Li*).”<sup>22</sup> This position was probably generally accepted around Lady Wang’s time.

For Lady Wang, humans are ethically and metaphysically the most beautiful beings. She believes that human nature is good and connected to an ethical concept of moral perfection. This good is not only perfect in itself but also sufficient to correct our mistakes, to destroy evils, and to purify our flaws. It is an endowed capacity and disposition that humans possess, the knowledge of which can be acquired through coming to an understanding of the universe. She believes that those who habitually slander others and thus harm their own welfare must have a sense of insecurity and deficiency. This is because the way of the universe is also in conformity with the ideal moral principles of humanity, which are their nature. Unfortunately, Lady Wang does not tell us the source of the evils that beset people, and this is a lacuna in her philosophy. (Her analysis of human relations only touches upon it; something that will be discussed later.)

## Morality as the Path to Enlightenment

Lady Wang comes to value morality—the virtues of steadfastness and the notion of purity as staying true to one’s nature—as the path to one’s enlightenment. In fact, in her mind, morality and enlightenment are inseparable from the beginning of the path to the end, when one has attained enlightenment. This is a clear point of emphasis made by Lady Wang in *The Plaint*.

When lost among hardships to be endured  
One should remain strong and self-assured,  
Girding volition to be strong and right,  
For none dares challenge the stones so hard and white.

This allusion to the hardness and purity of a white stone is derived from Confucius’s *Analects* (7: 17). In this context, Confucian moral reformation coincides with the Daoist virtue of forming a cosmic body that is One with nature (*Dao*) (*Laozi* 39, 55). It is also identical with the Buddhist law of *karma*, i.e., happiness and freedom (*nirvana*) are a mode of good fortune that is attained only by those who are virtuous.

Here again we see Lady Wang’s feminine way of thinking and expression in her use of narrative, metaphor, and analogy. She is both sensitive to and observant of the details of things. The white stones she mentions were used by the ancients as a means of purifying water. A later philosopher, Xiong Mingyu (1579–1649 CE), tells us in the “*Luojiaochaji*”: “To improve water put a white stone into a clay jar — it is not only good for making the water taste as sweet as clear spring water, but also shows the excellence of whiteness and hardness of a white stone — this inspires my mind profoundly” (2007: 369). White stones not only improve the quality and taste of water but also provide spiritual inspiration for those who observe the phenomenon. In this regard, Daoist “weak” water (*Laozi* 8, 10 in Lau 1963: 12 14) and Confucian solid white stones were applied together by Lady Wang to remove impureness and to reach perfection. She is as “weak” as spring water and yet her

will is as strong as water that can drill into a stone. “The best is like water, water is good; it benefits things and does not compete with them. It dwells in lowly places that all disdain. That is why it is so near to Dao” (*Laozi* 8 in Chan 1963: 143).

“[The] sage embraces the One/And becomes the model of the world” (*Laozi* 22 in Chan 1963: 151). Lady Wang followed the Daoist method of holding fast to the One as a metaphysical principle and thus was finally able to realize enlightenment by means of her moral virtue. She attained immortality with a “cosmic body” and she experienced “*Shouyi* (preserving the One)” (Kohn 1993, 163–65; Robinet 1993, 123–24). The life of her physical body has come to an end and her soul is totally emancipated, “ascending to Heaven.” This finds expression in her joyous thoughts and the exultant cry that celebrates her success at the end of her ecstatic journey:

Free from perils and restraints once immense  
With a resounding shout I leap from hence!  
And should you wish to know where I am found  
Seek in the clear springs where white stones abound!”

## A Cry for Autonomy

Lady Wang’s last resounding cry, when her physical body dies and her soul ascended to Heaven, can be understood as a plea for autonomy.<sup>23</sup> Hers was not a passive self-exile or escape from society, as she raised a rebellious voice protesting against her society, requesting to be considered as her own person. Her thinking also developed the concept *shendu* (cautious self-evaluation) as advocated in the *Doctrine of the Mean* or *Zhongyong*: “The superior man is watchful over himself when he is alone.”<sup>24</sup> In addition, she practised Confucian philosophy that encouraged moral self-cultivation built on an exemplar (*junzi*). (Originally *junzi* meant the son of the ruler, but later came to include all gentlemen who engaged in moral self-cultivation.) Lady Wang ignored her inferior gender position and expended every effort to make herself morally strong in order to attain wisdom. The prerequisite for a *junzi* to be watchful over himself is that of being “alone” and being able to face himself. Lady Wang found herself not only alone but also homeless, helpless, and abandoned. Her self-respect and self-encouragement expanded her consciousness and strengthened her desire for wisdom and autonomy.

In this context, by “autonomy,” I mean the capacity to be one’s own person. (This is not a term that would have been used in Lady Wang’s time in China, but it accurately captures what she sought during her life.) Individual autonomy is generally understood to refer to living one’s life according to one’s own reasons and motives and not as the product of manipulative or distorting external forces. It is a central value in Western ethical theory<sup>25</sup> and has recently become more familiar in Chinese ethics. According to contemporary theory on autonomy, if Lady Wang were truly autonomous, her choice to live or “to ascend” to Heaven should be self-determined by her own deeper self, her high moral values, and her informed choice. In reality,

however, the ultimate freedom that Lady Wang chose to enjoy, in a Daoist sense, was determined by the religious and philosophical worldview of her time, the economic system, the family structure, and the socially acceptable gender relationships of her society. The difference between freedom as autonomy and the social determinism that conditioned Lady Wang's choice is clear. Thus, while Lady Wang's last step of her ecstatic excursion is regarded from a Daoist viewpoint as a successful "ascending" to Heaven and from a Buddhist viewpoint as a reward of her good deeds, from a sociological perspective, there is a different explanation. Her death is a form of self-exile, a fate imposed on a wife-concubine of the gentry-class family system in Song-Jin China.

This helps to understand better why Lady Wang's cry for autonomy was in a sense a demand for a form of equality between the two genders. Yet such an interpretation of *The Complaint* is not sufficiently convincing for her to be claimed as a model by contemporary feminist readers. This is because she devotes almost one third of the poem to express how eager she is to see her husband and to explain all that has befallen her. She also undertook to study and practice the doctrine of the *Great Learning*, so as to fulfill the function of a moral teacher for her husband as requested in the Four Books for Women.<sup>26</sup> In this way, she seems to be a woman with more of a Confucian mind-set who wants to be part of the conventional arrangement between the sexes. Lady Wang's thinking on autonomy, however, challenges Confucian ethics on the subject of human relations. She criticizes the moral principles of human relations that were dominant in the China of her time. She not only questions the ethical and philosophical reasoning that determines them but also criticizes the social structure with its hierarchical system and the imposed gender roles of the society. In *The Complaint*, Lady Wang examined all five relations and their distortions using many examples taken from her life and Chinese history. She asks: "Have the five cardinal human relations ever destroyed plots or machinations?" Mencius had explained the Five Human Relations as the following: between the ruler and the minister, there should be righteousness; between the father and the son, there should be affection; between the husband and the wife, there should be attention to their separable function; between the elder brother and the younger brother, there should be proper order; and between friends, there should be faithfulness.<sup>27</sup> Lady Wang thus reflects the applicability to these five relations to her own life.

## The Ethics of Human Relations

While some Daoist religious practices and forms of naturalistic philosophy seem famous for supporting an escape from the family and society, Daoist ethics developed chiefly in societies dominated by Confucianism and within a cultural orientation that stressed intimacy. This system is rooted in the conception of *Tianrenheyi* (Heaven, Earth, and humanity are one). In a Daoist community, then, each individual thus responds to things happening to them based on their own self-understanding of relationships that are derived from this metaphysical foundation. (In contrast,



modern Western culture has nurtured values of individuality and foregrounds responsibility to general principles of correct behaviour.)<sup>28</sup> The real distinction between Confucianism and Daoism is not so concerned with whether a particular action is right or wrong but about how ethics itself works within these two ethical systems. What is important is how each system justifies ethical values and gives guidance for motives and intentions. Confucianism begins with interdependent self-other relationships that are already inherent in family relations. This is because the universe is regarded as one family and “everyone within the four seas is my brother” (*Analects* 12: 5). They are internal relations, as they are natural family relations and should not to be questioned or reconstructed. This model has influenced the basic pattern of East Asian ethics as well as metaphysical and practical reasoning. In this cultural orientation, which applied in Confucian society and strongly influenced social life of Daoist and Buddhist communities, the rules (the “ought”) of the normative relations are always derived from existing or established entities or facts (the “is”) of self-other interdependence.

On the one hand, Lady Wang points out the illness of society and wants to highlight the need for the autonomy of every person. On the other hand, moral choice and moral judgment are complicated matters in any society, where the consequences of one action may be determined by various factors. So, while it may be that the principles of the five cardinal human relations that I mentioned above are correct and can have positive effect in bringing harmonious relations in Confucian society, these principles are based on predetermined internal relations of the family. In such a system, every member in the society is confined by his or her particular role and position. In these types of relations, right and wrong are therefore dependent on the actual agent and the specific situation, rather than on the principles. Yet, within this Chinese family structure, Lady Wang could never be considered a proper agent who had autonomy.

## Reflections on Lady Wang in the Context of the Gift

Lady Wang’s particular case, when considered in the context of the gift, highlights the problem of the notion of the gift for women in the Chinese tradition. The basic rule is that when a giver gives, he gives more than the thing given. There are legal and moral obligations involved, and the recipient should receive with a sense of obligation and caution of “the danger inherent in receiving” (Mauss 1990/2007: 80). Nevertheless, since the principle of gift exchange in the neo-Confucian system did not apply equally to all people on an individual basis, but to people in their interrelationships with other persons and society, there was no effective policy to punish those who harmed others through exploitation of the gift exchange. This observation makes Lady Wang’s case even more striking. The neo-Confucianism that dominated Song-Jin society was an advanced civilization. The propriety, rituals, and rites of gift giving and receiving are all detailed in numerous Confucian texts from observations, such as “in giving and receiving man and woman should not touch each

other,” to details of how to present gifts to the dead, what gifts to present to the mourners, what account books the gifts recorder should keep, and the correct forms of letters to be sent with gifts.<sup>29</sup> This is the gift exchange system of the social structure in which Lady Wang lived and where a concubine who lost her husband’s care, as in the case of Lady Wang, would not be considered a person in this society. She would have had no autonomy and integrity in this world, even though she might “choose” to “ascend” to the world beyond. She was in fact given away by her parents and had no say in the dynamics of the gift whatsoever. From today’s perspective, however, Lady Wang and her writing of *The Complaint* could be considered as making an immeasurable contribution to Chinese literature and philosophy.

## Conclusion

*The Complaint* expresses Lady Wang’s cry for autonomy and integrity that takes the form of a Daoist ecstatic excursion. The reflective or rational elements stem from a syncretic mixture of mysticism, romanticism, and feminine sensibility. Her ecstatic excursion temporarily emancipates her body and mind, and her story thus reveals the universal sufferings she encountered in her journey from Earth to Heaven. The Daoist elixir of immortality brings her ultimate freedom but denies the worth of her love and family. This is because it brings an end to her physical existence. Spiritual immortality, as a Daoist ideal, is nonetheless achieved.

I admire her rebellious spirit in her choice of ascending to Heaven rather than achieving it by a passive self-exile or by simply escaping from her society. The Confucian moral self-cultivation of “seeking cause in oneself” that she practices both tortures and supports her body and mind. Unfortunately, this cultivation did not provide guidance as to how a woman such as Lady Wang is to live. Instead, it encouraged the establishment of an ideal society based on personal cultivation within a family setting, rather than seeking to reform of the social system. At the same time, the Buddhist law of *karma* made Lady Wang unable to choose either to live or to die. If she continued to live, she could not get rid of her “desires” and “complaints” from suffering, which would result in *karma*. In contrast, to die by committing suicide, as we have read in the poem, would not be acceptable to the gods and would also create *karma*. In *The Complaint* Lady Wang portrays a standard of a way one could live, shaped by her study of all the religio-philosophical traditions that covered the relations between humans and the world, human nature, and human relations. She stresses the “constant virtue” of Daoist ethics: “He who knows the white, yet cleaves to the black becomes the standard by which all things are tested; And being such a standard/He has all the time a power that never errs, He return to the limitless” (*Laozi*: 28).<sup>30</sup> The historically constructed limitations of her time prevented Lady Wang’s ethical system from being applicable to everyone for the development of their individual integrity and autonomy. Nevertheless, it needs to be observed that her contribution to the understanding of ethics, religion, philosophy, as well as women’s thought in the Southern Song-Jin period is unique.

In Mr. Shen's introduction to *The Complaint*, he depicts Lady Wang as declining the elixir of immortality and embracing the Confucian call to family duty. He also has her being reunited with her husband after his first wife had died. This end also coincides with Zhu Xi's teaching in his public letter entitled: "Urging of Nuns to Return to Their Families." (Zhu was appointed as the prefect of Zhangzhou in Fujian province during 1190–1191 CE.) This letter was written at that time when many women in Zhangzhou gave up their family duties and went to stay in temples and monasteries for various reasons. In order to uphold the Confucian order of "the Three Bonds (the wife serves/obeys the ruler, the father and the husband) and the Five Relations," Zhu prohibited men and women from congregating in Buddhist abodes to recite scriptures and banned nunneries so as to regulate local communities by a Confucian morality and value system.<sup>31</sup> It seems that the Confucian tradition of "Great Learning," as is evident in the interpretations in Mr. Shen's writings, as well as by Zhu Xi and his followers, distorted Lady Wang's own version of *The Complaint*. As a result, it was not accredited to her as author in the academic world. Yet, because *The Complaint* conveys the idea of searching for autonomy and integrity through vividly described experiences of women in rhymed verse, it was easily accepted by women and lower classes. Thus, the social effect of the poem was more powerful than the public writing of the greatest neo-Confucian, Zhu Xi. Unfortunately, however, it survived only among a collection of strange stories and myths. This is because *The Complaint* described women's experiences in a mystic fashion, such as Lady Wang's visiting of goddesses in Heaven. At times, her life and her dreams are sometimes realistic and sometimes romantic and transcendent, as when Lady Wang depicts the Daoist "ecstatic excursion" and "ascended" to Heaven and became one with the Dao.

The autonomy that Lady Wang cried out for can only be realized in a society where the interrelationships of people that are based solely on family structure have been reformed. Perhaps the ideal situation is expressed as follows: "[I]n the late twentieth century, ... the obvious fact [is] that all economic systems depend on people in society having dispositions that extend beyond self-interest" (Williams 1985: 13). This kind of cooperation is based on certain capacities and dispositions of a person who is autonomous and not on an imposed rule that dictates the intimate forms of family relations. The members of a cooperative community also build intimate relations among themselves as "sisters and brothers" that are not predetermined by their particular family position or functions. Everyone then can act as equally responsible for adhering to certain principles without ignoring compassion. The most important aspect of this kind of caring and mutual relationship is that it urges every member in such relations to engage in moral self-cultivation in order to become a virtuous person. One does not want to harm others, not only for the reason that one does not want to harm oneself, but because of a deeply felt need for the long-term development of oneself and of all beings in the world. This also indicates that one regards one's nature as being one with everyone, with everything, and with the world itself. Being virtuous then, needs to be accepted as a necessary aspect of a person who has autonomy. Autonomy could be realized only in relation to others in a society where material and spiritual development are compatible with each other. It is a pity that Lady Wang could not realize such a combination of qualities in her own lifetime.

## Notes

1. The Philosophical Meditation of Lady Wang. Lewiston, USA, Queenston, Canada and Lampeter, UK. Edwin Mellen, 2013.
2. This is Socrates' famous question for philosophy. Plato, *Republic*. 352d.
3. Other scholars also hold this position. See Y. Liu (1996), Z. Li, Zhenmin, and G. Dong (eds.) (1999: 256).
4. See the book of *Mencius* 4A: 26. After the great sage philosopher Confucius (551–479 BCE), Mencius/Mengzi (ca. 371–289 BCE) was the most important philosopher on the question of human nature, for his theory of the original goodness of human nature ("we are born with four moral senses," *Mencius* 6A), which made the greatest contribution to Confucianism.
5. Together with its ten "Appendixes" that appeared much later in the third century BCE, the doctrine of the *Book of Changes* uniquely established the foundation of Chinese cosmology and ethico-metaphysics. As the cosmic forces of vitality, *yin* and *yang* are regarded as the origin of the universe that is produced by the *Dao* ("Appendixes," 1: 5).
6. The Four Books are Confucius' *Analects* (*Lunyu*), the work of Mencius (*Mengzi*), the *Great Learning* (*Daxue*), and the *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong*); see Legge (1991–1994). They were selected from ancient Chinese Classics and reinterpreted by Zhu Xi (1130–1200) and other neo-Confucianists for the purpose of enhancing Confucianism when it was challenged by Buddhism and Daoism.
7. For example, the *New Songs of Yaochi/Yaochixinyongji* from Dunhuang, a collection of poems by Daoist nuns, has enriched the *Complete Collection of Tang Poems/Quan Tangshi*.
8. Laozi (sixth century BCE) was an archivist and soothsayer of the later Zhou dynasty recorded in Sima Qian's *The Historian's Record* (1959: 7: 63). He is one of the greatest Chinese thinkers, whose thought is contained in the *Daodejing/Laozi*, which provides the foundation for a philosophical system—Daoism. After 142 CE, Laozi was deified as a god and became one of the triads of supreme gods of the first organized Daoist religion, the Celestial Masters (*Tianshidao*). The *Daodejing* thus became the main scripture of the Daoist religion. For differences between philosophical and religious Daoism, see Fung, Yu-lan (1966: 3).
9. In this paper I will also use phrases such as "ascending to Heaven," "achieving immortality," "achieving immortality by means of an ecstatic journey," or "becoming One with the Dao." These phrases all signify the ultimate break with the world of humanity and the transcendence of all that is ordinary, common, and normal, in mind and in body, such as in the case of Lady Wang. Sometimes I use "enlightenment" to emphasize this state of mind in which a person becomes one with the *Dao*. There are various ways of "ascending to Heaven" in religious Daoism, and taking the elixir of immortality is the most immediate and effective way for the ascending journey. Those who took the elixir of

immortality knew where they were going and prepared for it through the perfection of morality, wisdom, and meditation.

10. Maoshan-Shangqing became the name of the second school of Daoism religion in the late fourth century CE, though the school traces its origins to the Mao brothers of the second century BCE who had retreated to Maoshan/Mt. Mao in Jurong, southeast of present-day Nanjing. *Shangqin* (highest clarity, purity, or great clarity) stresses that the Daoists of this school accessed the higher heavens and met with more exalted deities than those known to the first Daoist school. See Strickmann (1978: 1–63).
11. The book of *Zhuangzi* is a collection of the philosopher Zhuangzi and some anonymous authors of the third century BCE. The *Songs of Chu/Chuci* is a collection of poetry or “semi-ritual songs” by Qu Yuan of the third century BCE. The *Shanhaijing* is a collection of Chinese myths. It contains the story about a certain Chang E at the Chinese Middle Autumn Festival when people eat the Moon Cakes.
12. For example, Chang E’s husband, Houyi, shot down the nine burning suns with arrows and left one in the sky for the world. The Queen Mother of the West, the greatest Daoist Goddess, gave him the elixir of immortality as a reward. (See S. E. Cahill [1993].) Chang E stole the elixir, ascended to the moon, and achieved immortality. In *The Complaint*, Chang E offers the elixir to Lady Wang for her sincerity. Because Lady Wang cannot share this gift with her husband, however, she does not take it at this time and so eschews immortality.
13. See Kohn (1993: 250).
14. The common family problem of jealousy among wives and concubines could develop into a crime, as Lady Wang experienced. To deal with this common social problem, Sima Guang (1019–1086 CE), the famous neo-Confucian moralist, instructed that no virtue was more important in a woman than the capacity to avoid jealousy. Wives should suppress feelings of jealousy when their husbands dote on their concubines and should live harmoniously with concubines who were sanctioned by the tradition to serve the couple (*Jiafan* 9: 679).
15. For example, Ouyang Xiu (1007–1072 CE) received two gold cups and two maids from Wang Ceng for writing something excellently for Wang (Ceng Zao 1964: 1).
16. Goddess worship was popular in Lady Wang’s hometown (*Chronology of Julu*, 1992: 665). Ban Zhao of the Han was the first female moralist who wrote a book for women.
17. The Old Mother of Lishan was a Daoist immortal. Li Quan of the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE) wrote that he had obtained *The Yellow Emperor’s Text of Talismans* from a gap in the rocks on Mt. Sunshan. He chanted it every day but could not understand it. Later he met the Old Immortal Mother at Mt. Lishan in Qin and was enlightened by her.
18. For the importance of Lady Wang’s understanding of the order of the universe, see Mill [1874] 1969: 69–70.
19. All sections of the poem in this paper are from my translation of *The Complaint*.

20. This idea also anticipates the Buddhist tradition of the silent transmission of the perfection of wisdom, especially in Chan Buddhism.
21. See “The Great Norm,” J. Legge, trans. (1994: Vol. 3: 323–26). See also Y. Guo (2001).
22. This approach continues and develops the nine-category structure of the “Great Norm” (*Book of History*), the theories in the work of *Mencius*, the “Doctrine of the Mean,” and Zhang Zai’s “Ximing” (Chan 1963: 463–64, 497). See also Fung 1953, vol. 2: 436, and Song Yuan Xue’an ([1617] 1986: 12.1A).
23. Zhu Xi, [1654] 2002, Vol. 15, 49: 8b.
24. I have discussed elsewhere that the Chinese believe that each person possesses two souls *hun* (spiritual) and *po* (physical). See “Zuozhuan: Duke Zhao, 7th year” in J. Legge, trans. (1991–1994: vol. 4: 613).
25. See the “Doctrine of the Mean: 1” in J. Legge, Vol. 1: 384.
26. Kantian ethics and Mill’s utilitarianism accord fundamental status to autonomy. See Kant, [1785] 1948, and Mill, [1859] 1977: Ch. III.
27. The Four Books for Women are often listed as *Nujie/the Admonition for Women* (attributed to the first woman scholar Ban Zhao of Han); *Nulunyu/The Analects for Women* (written by two sisters of the Song family in Tang); the Ming Empress Wen’s writing, *Neixun/The Regulation for the Inner Quarters*; and the *Nufanjielu/The Concise Records of Model Women* (written by woman Liu of Qing, who was Wang Xiang’s widowed mother.)
28. See *Mencius*: 3A: 4. See also Tu, Weiming (1998: 121–36).
29. See philosophical and cultural differences of the East and the West in Kasulis 2002. In what follows I describe traditional Confucian social relations. They do not reflect the actual state of Chinese families in contemporary China as well as in East Asia. Family values in China have rapidly changed after 1840, especially after the 1970s.
30. *Mencius*: 4: 17; Ebrey (1991: 121–22; 98–99; 71; 143–44).
31. Translated by Waley in 1958: 178. This text has been translated variously, for example, white (glory) and black (humanity) in Chan 1963: 154. Compare it with the translation of D. C. Lau 1963: 33.
32. Zhu Xi (2002, vol. 25, 6: 4618); Zhu Xi (2000, vol. 10: 100); Ching, Julia (2000: 233); Tu, Wei-Ming (1998: 123).

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## Chapter 4

# Economies of Sainthood: Disrupting the Discourse of Female Hagiography

Kathleen McPhillips

Traditional stories of saints, known as hagiographies, are texts that commonly position female saints in economies of sacrifice. Women saints are thus exemplars of an all-giving, sacrificial mode of being that characterises holiness and union with God. Traditionally, female saints have been “produced” for the community by male clerics who interpret the “voice” of the saint and produce a saintly life in very particular discursive conditions (Ashton 2000). Through such texts, she provides for the faithful an account of holiness by subjecting mind, body, soul and heart to the rigours and disciplines of a holy life which can involve sacrificing individuality, subjecting the body to extreme levels of pain and martyrdom, denying the body nourishment and rest, repressing sexuality and living with the poorest of the poor. Such economies of sainthood are based on notions of femininity constructed as idealised womanhood and can become “dangerous texts” for women’s struggle towards autonomy and authentic subjecthood (Joy 1994: 117–18).

The interjection of feminist critiques into the discourse of hagiography (Ashton 2000; Jantzen 1995; Joy 1994) aims to understand the ways in which the lives of female saints comply with the normative conventions of hagiography which is largely clericalised and masculinised and how critical interjections might disrupt this discourse to see if saints have something to say of meaning to contemporary women searching for spiritual insight. Remembering the life of one such saint – the Australian Catholic colonial woman, Mary MacKillop who founded an order of religious sisters known as the Institute of St Joseph in South Australia in 1866 – may help us to see that her spirituality and insight could hold a deep wisdom for women seeking an authentic sense of self, one where there is reciprocity, not sacrifice. This is a different economy that takes love as the basis of exchange between women, men and the divine and where voice is not censored but encouraged. In this essay I want to argue that feminist interjections into female hagiographic texts

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might reveal a different economy of sainthood: one based on female holiness as reciprocity where the saintly self reveals a voice not completely colonised by the Law of the Father and where other, less censored, resonances might be heard.

I believe that the life of Mary MacKillop is tightly bound in both traditional hagiography and colonial narrative. Because she was a woman born in colonial times, her life is well documented in the thousands of letters that she herself wrote and that were written to and about her. She also kept a journal, which provides a particularised narrative account of her own understandings and insight into her life and self. There are millions of words written about this saint and by this saint, yet do we know who she was? And what she was trying to say about her relationship with God?

## Sainthood and Its Narratives

There were many qualities that made Mary the special woman she was – her utter selflessness, her kind heart, her gritty determination, her love and concern for her fellow Australians, her life of sacrifice, her dedication to making a difference. Always, she lived her life for a greater end – to help and encourage the ‘underdog.’ She valued individuals, and made it the priority of the Sisters to meet their needs – body, mind and soul. (O’Brien 1994: 265)

These words by Lesley O’Brien, who penned one of the biographies of Mary MacKillop in 1994, are typical of the discourses of hagiography *and* Australian colonialism. In the text, the national character is articulated through a respect for individualism and a “fair go”, the idealisation of the “underdog” and the notion of self-sacrifice as necessary to the growth of the nation. We can also identify the principal elements of female hagiography: denial of one’s own needs, sacrifice in order to bring about change, living for the “greater end” and the demarcation of a life that is holy. These two discourses intersect in the life of Mary MacKillop.

As a genre, hagiography can be defined as narratives that contain compelling material about a life that is holy, where the reader is encouraged to enter into a textual process that interprets a life linked together by certain spiritual events and moral outcomes (Wyschogrod 1990: 3). It is a very particular kind of life storytelling and for particular audiences and communities. Hagiographies use certain narrative techniques. These are exhibited in the representation of the nominated person as “different”. For example, hagiography typically represents the saint as identifiably “different” from an early age and as one who is often in conflict with religious institutions. As a rule, a saint’s behaviour is marked by selflessness and a generous concern for the most despised and marginal other (Wyschogrod 1990: 10).<sup>1</sup> The basic narrative material of hagiography includes written texts such as diaries, heroic stories, sites of pilgrimage, tales of wounded bodies, divine visions, prayer, miracles and so on. It is a narrative that is placed within an economy of sacrifice and indeed uses the language of sacrifice to describe aspects of subjectivity.

Feminist critiques of female hagiography argue that saintly texts are constructed within specific kinds of gendered power relations (Ashton 2000; Jantzen 1995;

Maitland 1990). In her account of Christian mysticism, Grace Jantzen states that the Church has always been particularly careful about who it allowed to claim intimate knowledge of God:

If ... mystical experience (or religious experience more generally) were to be trusted, this would provide an authoritative basis for knowledge of the existence and nature of God: if this were to be established and acknowledged, it would accord enormous authority to those whose experience was deemed to be veridical. (1995: 2)

Thus, the ecclesial process of deciding who will count as a mystic or not is also a highly political question concerned with the intersections of gender and power relations (Jantzen 1995: 2). This is also exemplified by Gail Ashton, who states: “Without doubt hagiography is a textual representation that is ultimately also a cultural and historical construct” (2000: 3).

Hagiographies are an important technology in the production of sainthood and in the maintenance of particular gender relations. Ashton suggests, however, that hagiographic texts can be excavated to reveal “woman” as a speaking subject, rather than as object/reflection of male desire:

For there is also a feminine experience contained within these texts. It is articulated differently, often through the body and its fissures, but, nevertheless, what is indicated is the presence of a speaking “I” that is “woman”. (2000: 159)

This voice might be revealed when there is a move beyond the written text as the dominant signifier of saintliness. Then, the feminist hagiographer looks for gaps, inconsistencies, contradictions, the voice of the body or even silence. This involves an understanding of “text” comprising all the multiple ways in which meaning is constructed. Specifically, the feminist investigator looks for heteroglossic or multiple voices in order to examine all the ways in which the saint might be communicating spiritual truths and divine experience. Some of these phenomena may be located in a written text, and some may be outside the normal conventions of hagiography, even the normal conventions of narrative (Wyschogrod 1990: 10–11). Feminist critics writing today thus have a dual function: to “unravel” the hagiography produced by the male cleric and to reinterpret the life of the saint with regard to her authentic voice and body (Ashton 2000: 3). Indeed, Ashton contends that:

... female hagiographical texts are inherently fissured and unstable texts, the conflicting demands of generic and rhetorical conventions and intentions, plus the imposition of a reductive dual identity of saint and ideal woman, often resulting in texts marked by hesitation, suppression and ambiguity [*sic*]. (2000: 4–5)

Another element placed within an economy of sacrifice is the narrative structures that describe colonial Australia. The work of Australian feminist historians such as Kay Schaffer, Marilyn Lake and Anne Summers on the gendered dimensions of Australian national character demonstrates clearly the masculinisation of public space and the feminisation of private space from the earliest days of colonial life. The struggle to establish a working colony in a place far removed from the idealised green and civilised land of England is reflected in the development of particular iconographic images and language. These include the unforgiving outback bush; the

necessity for hard living and sacrifice; the shame of convict beginnings; the difficult, often violent, relationships with Aboriginal tribes; the abuse of alcohol; the heroism of exploration; and the celebration of larrikinism and individualism with its resistance to and disdain of authority. In colonial discourse, women rarely appeared in their own right. Rather they appeared in relationship to men as daughters, lovers, wives and mothers. They are always spoken for, always under male authority. To speak on their own is problematic because it disrupts the patriarchal symbolic (Schaffer 1988: 63). Within such gendered space, women were the “other” and split into idealised or debased femininities or as Anne Summers (1975) so eloquently described colonial femininity in the title of her book: *Damned Whores and God’s Police*. Women’s agency was fostered and represented by means of this split, which for Schaffer has its origins in language and its exclusionary/inclusionary tendencies. That is to say, language assumes the national identity is masculine where the feminine denotes forms of difference and positions of marginality (Schaffer 1988: 172). She argues:

Women are trapped within the webs of discourse, unable to speak what we might be or to locate a place for women’s absolute difference beyond the constraining sentence of patriarchy. If we are to go beyond the white male mastery of the past, we also need to go beyond the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion which we use and are used by others to divide our positions, one from another. (Schaffer 1988: 173)

As a colonial Catholic woman, Mary sits between the discourses of white colonialism and that of sainthood. Indeed, her biography titles often make reference to both discourses: *Mary MacKillop: No Plaster Saint – A Pioneering Woman for our Time* (Dunne 1994) and *Mary MacKillop: An Extraordinary Australian* (Gardiner 1998). Notions of self-sacrifice, self-censorship, patience and humility constitute intersecting values that have been attributed to her. However, she was also a problem for both symbolic systems. Her work as the founder of the order of the Institute of the Sisters of St Joseph<sup>2</sup> meant that she was positioned in public discourse and thus subject to the rules of these discourses. But her resistance to abide by these rules by insisting on the independence of her order, in addition to her own powerful experience of God, led to a life of disruption and political struggle.

Her public visibility was problematic for the Church elite and required careful management, often undertaken by the male clergy. Without doubt, she was constituted as a member of “God’s Police”, much like other early colonial women who also cared for the marginalised, including Daisy Bates and Caroline Chisholm.<sup>3</sup> Schaffer argues that women who were public figures and who worked independently were “inscribed into the culture as God’s Police [and were] women who looked after the moral interest of the nation under the paternal metaphor” (1988: 63). The fissures between the ideal and reality become clearer, however, as Mary’s determination to set up an order of nuns in accordance with her own relationship to God brings her into direct conflict with the Catholic hierarchy. Is it possible to read the life of Mary as a disruptive text? If so, how would this be formed? And what might such texts reveal about the life of this saint that might be of benefit to contemporary women’s subjectivity?

## Constructing a Saint

Mary MacKillop was born in Melbourne in 1842, just at the end of the period of convict transportation to Australia. Her parents had migrated separately from the Scottish highlands and met in Melbourne. According to most sources and Mary's letters, her family life was difficult (Dunne 1994; O'Brien 1994; Gardiner 1998). As the eldest of eight children – an average-sized family by colonial standards – Mary had hefty responsibilities while growing up and caring for her younger siblings (O'Brien 1994: 17). Her father, a fiery temperamental man, was an intellectual who had trained briefly for the priesthood but had no head for business and, over the course of Mary's early childhood, lost the family money (O'Brien 1994: 17).

Mary spent much of her girlhood at home helping her mother. She attended school sporadically although her father tutored her, and she could read English and Gaelic. In 1858 at the age of 16, Mary began work as a governess and became the family's principal wage earner. Her work as a governess gave her a sensitivity to the ways in which people were judged according to their class status (O'Brien 1994: 23). In 1860 at the age of 18, she was offered a position as governess to her cousins, the Camerons, in Penola, South Australia (about 160 km from Portland and close to Victorian border). It was here she first met Julian Tenison Woods who was then the parish priest of Penola. Woods was a major influence in Mary's life becoming her spiritual advisor and confessor (Dunne 1994: 7). He was a charismatic, intense person and also highly ambitious. He was undoubtedly intelligent and had skills as a botanist, geologist, scholar and writer.

Woods encouraged Mary in her desire to become a nun and saw her fitting in with his own plans to pioneer a new religious order in South Australia which would provide education for the Catholic poor (Dunne 1994: 9). In 1866 the first school was opened, fittingly in a converted stable in Penola, with Mary as lay teacher. Within a short period of time, Mary had donned a simple black dress, and by August 1867 Mary had taken vows before Tenison Woods and was calling herself by the name Mother Mary of the Cross, in the Institute of the Sisters of St Joseph (who were called Josephites) (Dunne 1994: 11). Soon after this, three young novices joined the order and together with Mary moved to Adelaide to set up a school and convent. At the time, education was expensive, in the hands of lay teachers, poorly organised across the state and certainly out of the reach of the mostly poor and jobless Catholic majority. The Institute offered free education by nuns who also lived in poverty. It was immediately successful, and by 1868 there were 200 pupils and 50 nuns. Over the next 30 years, Mary established Josephite schools across South Australia, New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland and then in New Zealand. She spent weeks travelling on the road in difficult conditions, accompanied by young postulants to remote outback areas, leaving these young women to establish schools and convents.

The Josephites' mission, which was to care of the poor, meant their work covered the social spectrum. They set up the first home for young unmarried mothers in Adelaide and worked with orphaned children and the homeless. The nuns relied on

public donations to continue and, in the beginning, often had to beg for food. This was a source of constant embarrassment for the Church hierarchy, who considered this to be inappropriate behaviour for women (O'Brien 1994: 51). The nuns came under pressure from various bishops to limit the education to the middle classes, but Mary remained committed to the poor (O'Brien 1994: 51).

At that time, joining the convent was often the only real alternative to marriage for women. Girls joined the Institute for a variety of reasons but often to escape a repetition of their mother's colonial lives, where they married young, had large families and lived in rough conditions. Husbands were often away for long periods of time droving cattle, gold digging or working. Joining the convent was a respectable alternative – although joining the Institute to live in poverty was considered a radical option – indeed as it still would be today (O'Brien 1994: 56).

Although the Institute received Church support in its early days, Mary's attempts to begin convents and schools across Eastern Australia brought her into conflict with the clergy and bishops who were threatened by her independence and ambition. At first glance a reading of her letters reveals quite clearly that Mary MacKillop recognised and submitted to the paternal authority of the bishops and of Rome. She often urged her sisters to respect and abide by ecclesiastical authority as she herself tried to do. But she also speaks with another voice, one that insists on abiding by "the Rule", conceived by herself and Julian Tenison Woods. "The Rule", dates from 1867, is the basis of the order's constitution and governance and reads as follows:

The Sisters are to educate the poor, be unknown and poor themselves, and give themselves wholly to God for the salvation of their souls. They are to support themselves solely from what the pupils can afford, if anything, and from alms. No dowries and no community ownership of houses or properties is allowed. A Sister Guardian General, elected every six years by the nuns, has authority over all the houses. Branches of the institute will work in consultation and co-operation with the diocesan Bishop but are not under his complete authority. All sisters are of equal rank: no choir of teaching nuns served by lay Sisters. All novices will be trained in the Mother house. Sisters wear plain woollen habits to the floor with veils and black boots. Convent rooms have cotton curtains, no carpets, and furniture such as poor people use. Beds are straw mattresses on raised planks in dormitory settings. Sisters abstain frequently from meat and fruit, drink from tin cups and travel third class. Silence is to be observed as much as possible. (Cited in Dunne 1994: 12–13)

The Rule stipulates that paternal ecclesial authority will be located in Rome rather than within the local diocesan structure which in the mid-1800s was being established by the Catholic bishops. This disrupted the paternal symbolic by playing man (Pope) against man (local bishop). Although the Rule was eventually endorsed by Rome, against the wishes of Australian bishops, it is clear that for Mary this was a mighty political struggle. It weighed her down, ravaged her health and almost caused the closure of the order on a number of occasions. It led at times to intense loneliness, which was only relieved by her deep belief in the love of God. At the height of the campaign by the clergy against "the Rule" (and also against the order, because it was out of their direct control), Mary writes to Bishop Sheil in Adelaide:

It is in the most docile and humble spirit, my Lord, that I venture to say what are and have been for many years the thoughts of my heart. I have longed for a religious life, one in which I could serve God and his poor neglected little ones in poverty and disregard of the



world and its fleeting opinions...I know that you can withdraw your approbation from [the Rule] and if our good God so wills it, I am resigned. But oh, pardon me, my Lord, if I say that I cannot in conscience see the Rule altered and remain still a Sister. (Cited in Dunne 1994: 19)

The highest authority for Mary was the will of God, and in the extract from the following letter, she clearly states that not only is she aware of the desires of God, but that she will resign rather than change what she sees as a sacred document. She is severely castigated by the bishop for voicing her allegiance to God. She writes to her friend and co-founder of the Institute, Julian Tenison Woods in response:

His Lordship bitterly reproached me with the want of religious submission expressed in my letter saying he had not expected such from me.... I could think of nothing but the poor Bishop's displeasure, and if I dared would then have yielded, but I dared not, for I felt that my first duty was to God and to the Rule which for His sake I had vowed to follow no matter what obstacles might be thrown in its way. (Cited in Dunne 1994: 20)

Shortly afterwards Mary was excommunicated by Bishop Sheil, and the order told to disband. It was not until a change of heart on his deathbed some months later that Mary was reinstated into the Church. Mary's insistence that the Institute's Constitution name Rome as its immediate supervisor meant that the local diocesan structure would have little authority over the nuns and their work. That an order of nuns might have complete control over decision-making, the movement of members and training was inconceivable. In 1880 James Quinn, Bishop of Adelaide, wrote that it was "impossible for me to accept the government of a woman or to have a community of nuns governed by a lady from Adelaide. I won't allow any woman to make a disturbance in my diocese". He also denounced her as "the daughter of a colonial seminarian" (O'Brien 1994: 158).

Finally, in July 1888, Rome recognised the Institute as a religious order. Mary herself by this time was 47 years old. Her relationship with Father Woods, who co-founded the order with Mary, some 20 years before, had broken down, ostensibly over the scandals involving "the Rule". Some evidence exists, however, that his marginalisation from the Institute by the bishops, as it gathered ecclesial recognition, caused him serious grief (Dunne 1994: 15). In addition, he had mismanaged a number of state educational projects and suffered some kind of "emotional illness" which affected his judgement (Dunne 1994: 15). He left Australia for a short time to pursue scientific interests and later died in Sydney in 1989 without a reconciliation with Mary (Dunne 1994: 81–82; Press 1994: 225). Despite this development, Mary continued to refer to Woods as "father founder", even though she was the actual founder of the order (Press 1994). Mary wrote an account of Woods' life, *Julian Tenison Woods: A Life*, probably in 1890 (Press, in MacKillop 1997: vii–ix).

Mary MacKillop died in 1909, 40 years after donning her simple black dress. She left behind 750 nuns with convents and schools in most dioceses of Australia and New Zealand that taught over 12,000 children (Dunne 1994: 86).

## Approaches to Reading Mary's Spirituality

In the powerful symbolic context of colonial and hagiographic discourse, is it possible to hear Mary's own voice, to know her experience of God and to understand her spiritual quest? Gail Ashton (2000: 4) argues that it is possible to make discursive interjections that open up spaces, where we might begin to hear the voice of the saint. For Ashton, sainthood is not a hermetically sealed discourse, but rather it is a contested site where multiple meanings are produced within a framework of power and disruption. From this perspective, the landscape of holiness can be viewed as disconcerting and indeterminate (Ashton 2000: 3–5).

Applying Ashton's insights to the life of Mary MacKillop helps produce the possibility of a contested interpretation of her subjectivity and spirituality. Indeed, I suggest that there might be a disjuncture between the ways in which her biographers present her subjectivity and how she expresses herself through her journal and letters. This points to the limits of conventional hagiography as a textual tool for the representation of modern sainthood (McPhillips 2003).

For example, a central aspect of the traditional landscape of female holiness is patience and modesty. It is obvious in the letters above, in Mary's responses to Bishop Sheil, that while Mary often *uses* the language of modesty and submission, she does, in fact, express the opposite: determination and wilfulness. In her response to Sheil, she expressed deference to his status but actually refuses to change the Constitution.

Mary writes clearly about being impatient, such as in this excerpt from a letter to her brother about an incident with Mother Bernard, who became Mother General after Mary: "I lost my temper with Mother General on one particular occasion which I shall ever regret for I forgot what I owed to her in her position.... I could not honestly feel that she was either true or just" (cited in Dunne 1994: 83).

Grace Jantzen suggests that a number of mediaeval women saints utilised a "modesty formula" which involved describing the self in humble terms as a necessary and conscious tactic when conversing with men in particular (1995: 170). Under the guise of a language of modesty, a special relationship to God can be expressed with spiritual verve and authority. There is some evidence that Mary used such a formula. Note her account of the difficult political work she undertook to bring the order into existence, "Often when smarting under insults and misrepresentations which I longed to resent, I would have to go and do the 'dirty work' as many call it, simply because I could not resist God's pleading voice or look" (cited in Dunne 1994: 83).

Ashton argues that patience is a form of interiority, which can be read as the saint actively expressing charity and love (2000: 116–17). This was a characteristic part of Mary's spirituality. While her biographers read this conduct as a sign of saintly submission to God, Ashton suggests that patience points to a hidden self-identity:

My concern is with a patience which not only marks the female saint as holy, but provides an opportunity for the secret nurturing of a hidden, masked self. The concealment of such a personal identity is, at once, protective and a confounding, and its practice a mimicry that

demonstrates the extent to which the female has learned the rules of a patriarchal world which has constructed her (117) ... Patience is associated not only with poverty, but with silence, enclosure, withdrawal, and a closing down or concealment of emotion. (2000: 120)

While patience might well be interpreted solely as actively seeking God, it is in fact Mary's biographers who mostly imbue her with this quality. Yet, her own journal and letters reveal a strong and wilful woman, determined to establish the order and overcome the necessary obstacles. This is an example of what Edith Wyschogrod refers to as the saint speaking against institutional authorities where "the saint insists on going her own way" (1990: 11).

It is also the case that Mary's biographers construct her as a suffering soul, a customary characteristic of a female saint. Mary's official biographer, Jesuit Paul Gardiner, even suggests that she suffers in particular ways, ways that non-saints might not be familiar with:

Mary was a sufferer, but not a sad sufferer, and she was certainly not a confused sufferer. She was always serene...there was never anything morbid about her thinking, and she never got into any psychological tangles by saying she was glad when things went wrong. (Gardiner 1998: 67)

Mary's own words from her journal, however, indicate that she did express explicitly how much she suffered:

[I] had a sad night. Cried myself to sleep. Was so weary of the struggle and felt so utterly alone. Could not pray...say my ordinary rosaries, only offered my weary heart's trials to my God with the wish that He would do His will and make of me what He pleased. – Diary of Mary MacKillop, 14 January 1874. (Cited in Dunne 1994: 37–38)

This might be regarded as a split between texts, where the dominant voice of the biographer reads her suffering as stereotypically feminine and passive, against alternative evidence from the saint herself.

In this instance, a transgressive, heteroglossic reading could help to appreciate the multiple voices in Mary's letters and journals. For example, Mary's experience of suffering could be seen as a place where she actively meets God through her body, revealing the presence of a divine Other. So it is her body, her flesh and her pain that express the moment of meeting between divine and human. This meeting is not always a felicitous one. Flesh and body, particularly that of women, have been a dark place within patriarchy: the site of women's deepest oppression and control. Mary's suffering is no exception, as she battled the symptoms of dysmenorrhoea for many years. At one stage her canonisation was held up for years when she was accused of being an alcoholic, whereas, in fact, she had been carefully self-medicating severe period pains (O'Brien 1994: 174–85, 268–70). Wyschogrod encourages an understanding of the saintly body as a sensorium where, rather than seeing suffering as either the basis of sacrifice/redemption or a pathological symptom, it can be viewed as a phenomenological account of the relationship between the body and soul. Such an approach would centre the experience of the body as the site of divine revelation and as the subject of experience.

Approaching Mary's suffering from an embodied phenomenological perspective might provide evidence that bodily pain could be experienced as a moment of

radical generosity (Wyschogrod 1990). Mary opens her soul to the most despised aspect of “woman”, her body, and, in so doing, is open to an experience of God. It is clear in her journals and letters that what drives Mary’s faith is a profound relationship to the “other” – whether God or human. Is there evidence that her own bodily experiences were also included in her relationship with God? This narrative has yet to be explored through Mary’s letters, but two concepts could be utilised to focus further research on her expressions of an embodied spirituality.

The first is the idea proposed by Wyschogrod of a radical generosity employed by saints, which dissolves self-interest to the point where the voice of the other is heard/embodied. Wyschogrod argues that saints have been people who “put themselves totally at the disposal of the other” (1990: xiv) and are able to embrace the alterity or *difference* of the other, so “a saintly life is defined as one in which compassion for the other, irrespective of cost to the saint, is the primary trait” (ibid.). As a result, “sainthood” is not limited to those individuals nominated by formal institutional processes or connected to particular religious traditions. Instead, it indicates a wider phenomenon where a person is able to recognise the “other” not as monstrous or devalued but as profoundly human. Sainthood is “an expression of excessive desire, a desire on behalf of the Other that seeks the cessation of another’s suffering and the birth of another’s joy” (Wyschogrod 1990: xxiv). In this economy, giving is not about self-sacrifice, which is so typically expected of women. It concerns a relational experience with another that releases “otherness” into connectedness and recognition. It may be Mary’s saintliness lies in her desire to continually transform the degradations of “otherness”.

Related to this comes the idea of hospitality from Derrida (2002). Derrida states that hospitality is intrinsic to culture; “there is no culture that is not also a culture of hospitality” (2002: 361). But it is also the case that if hospitality is intrinsic to culture, then there is always the possibility of being overtaken, of being caught unawares, of not being ready to welcome another, of being violated and stolen because one is not ready to receive or of being forced to receive. Thus, for Derrida, the radical possibilities of hospitality towards the Other lie not in the moment of being ready to receive or of opening one’s house to a stranger but, in the opposite, of welcoming the totally unexpected, especially the uninvited visitor, “the absolutely unforeseeable stranger” (2002: 361). Traditional saintliness can be read as an exemplar of hospitality, not only in the sense that the saint welcomes the most marginalised and despised but that her desires of God may also be unwelcome and impossible. Mary herself seems to hint at this when she says: “Whatever troubles may be before you, accept them cheerfully, remembering Whom you are trying to follow. Do not be afraid. Love one another, bear with one another, and let charity guide you in all your life” (quoted in Gardiner 1998: 478). Without doubt, the evidence through her letters and journals that she suffered psychologically, spiritually and physically is clear. That she was able to understand this as a gesture of welcoming God is perhaps the most what marks her sainthood. In 1883 she writes to another sister “Between one thing and another, I am nearly crushed. It would not matter if I were well, but I am not. Let us pray for one another and put all our hope and trust in our good God” (McCreanor 2006: 5).

## Conclusion

This essay has suggested that there is another subversive reading of the life of Mary MacKillop that is yet to be written. This account would explore her embodied spirituality as the basis for a transgressive feminine subjectivity as part of her saintliness. The traditional hagiography demonstrates how she was able to live, resist authority and transgress given forms of female identity in colonial and Catholic Australia. Yet there are moments of slippage in colonial and hagiographic narratives, which hint at alternative economies of sainthood and reveal the limits of conventional hagiography. Such economies express not only reciprocity between saint and God and between the body and soul but also disruption between saint and institution and an ecstatic encounter with the divine. Such moments may well mark out alternative boundaries of holiness. Indeed, maybe the idea of holiness requires expansion and transformation as suggested by Irigaray (1993) and Jantzen (1998) and which might then include readings of women whose “saintliness” has been recognised and celebrated outside of the confines of masculinist hagiography, such as the life and death of Princess Diana (McPhillips 1997).

The Laws of the state, of the Church and of the Father are visible in the symbolic importance of controlling the feminine other: she is not to be independent, to travel as she likes, to go where she wants and to be outside the jurisdiction of the Law. Yet Mary MacKillop did so. Her struggles to live and breathe her love for God, as an embodied woman, are moments in the journey of becoming and are offered to others in a radical act of generosity where what is exchanged is love between human and divine.

## Notes

1. While hagiography is a textual genre, it is also a prevalent discursive form, which is used in other forms of writing such as the novel, biography and autobiography, in particular (Wyschogrod 1990: 6).
2. The history of women who join religious congregations dates back to the early periods of Christianity where women formed communities to live together in monastic life. With the advent of modernity, women religious began to form convents or institutes that moved out of the solitary character of monastic life and into the world with agendas of educating children and helping the poor. The Institute of the Sisters of St Joseph was formed at a time in Australian history when the need for education among Catholic children, most of whom were poor, was recognised by the Church as central to the development of a strong and influential Catholic church. See Gardiner (1998) and Press (1994).
3. Supporters of Caroline Chisholm have approached Catholic Bishops in Australia to request her consideration for sainthood (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 October 2007, 1–2). Currently (2015) her supporters are pursuing her status as a “cause”,

which is a precursor to acceptance for beatification (see <http://mrschisholm.com>). Daisy Bates worked for the welfare of Aboriginal people in South and Western Australian during the early 1900s and also documented much of the history and culture of the Aboriginal people she lived with.

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# Chapter 5

## Indigenous Spirituality: Perspectives from the First Indigenous Women's Summit of the Americas

Sylvia Marcos

### Introduction

The First Indigenous Women's Summit of the Americas (FIWSA)<sup>1</sup> was a United Nations meeting that took place in Oaxaca in December 2002. It was organised and promoted by a collective of indigenous leaders of international repute such as Rigoberta Menchú, Myrna Cunningham, Calixta Gabriel and other regional indigenous women from communities in the Americas.<sup>2</sup> The meeting consisted of about 400 indigenous women representing most countries and many indigenous communities.<sup>3</sup> Prior to the Summit, the organisers arranged a series of focus groups designed by the *Centro de Estudios e Información de la Mujer Multiétnica* (CEIMM) from the *Universidad de las Regiones Autónomas de la Costa Caribe Nicaragüense* (URACCAN), Nicaragua's indigenous university.

Drawing on several years of interaction and work with Mexico's indigenous worlds, my intention in this essay is to systematise the principles that have begun to emerge from distinctive indigenous women's 'cosmovision'.<sup>4</sup> References to indigenous spirituality are inspired by ancestral traditions recreated today as the indigenous people struggle for social justice. The inspiration for this struggle often comes from their system of beliefs. They derive from ritual, liturgical and collective worlds of worship that, though often hidden under Catholic Christian imagery, diverge significantly from Christianity, revealing their epistemic particularity. Working, as some authors have suggested, from 'cracks of epistemic differences', I characterise the indigenous movement as undertaking a 'decolonising' task.<sup>5</sup> The indigenous women are actively retrieving ancestral spiritualities in order to decolonise the religious universes they were forced to adopt during the historical colonial enterprise.

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My emphasis in this paper will be on the growing movement of indigenous spirituality as enacted and defined by Mesoamerican women. This is not to say that there are not other developing movements undertaken by activist Catholic women and ecofeminists from this same region of the Americas (see references below), but my focus in this context is the indigenous women and their reclamation of their ancestral spirituality.

The indigenous women of Mesoamerica are recuperating their traditional spirituality so that they may live again in a cosmos that fosters relationship and equilibrium. During the colonial era, this cosmovision was suppressed for centuries. Their process of reclaiming their traditional practices and knowledge can be considered as a gift. In the first place, it is a gesture of restoration to themselves, in that it enhances the lives of all in their own communities. In addition, it enriches the world as proposing a viable alternative to contemporary western modes of neocolonial globalisation with its virtually ubiquitous commodification and a lack of respect for the natural world.<sup>6</sup>

The basic documents, final declarations and collective proposals of the FIWSA, together with the material from the preparatory focus groups, called *Memoria*,<sup>7</sup> reveal an indigenous spirituality in contrast to the hegemonic, homogenising influences of the largely Catholic, Christian background of the women's respective countries.

The principles of this indigenous spirituality also differ from more recent influences of feminist and Latin American ecofeminist liberation theologies.<sup>8</sup> The participants' live presentations and addresses at the Summit brought to light particular expressions of their own spiritual inspirations. For example, indigenous Mesoamerican women both respect and fear the earth, because it can both nurture and destroy. In this they differ from ecofeminist theologies that often identify women's bodies with the earth's body in that they both reproduce life. Indigenous spirituality, however, identifies women only partially and in a more dynamic shifting movement with this basic, sometimes simplistic, identification. They seldom use images of the earth to refer to themselves as women. If they do, the reference is non-gendered, as in the introduction of the image of an ear of corn, which has a face that can neither be identified as male or female. In this way, the duality and gender fluidity as it features between male and female in the Mesoamerican epistemic frame – which will be elaborated later in this essay – becomes apparent. In this context, the ear of corn is a symbolic representation of nature and earth.

The theme of indigenous spirituality was transversal and intersected with every other issue addressed at the Summit. It was so prominent that a study of the Summit documents, voted on by consensus, reveals the priorities of the contemporary struggles, concerns and agendas of indigenous groups in the Americas. The documents propose indigenous spirituality as an origin and a stimulus for the recreation of collectivities and the emergence of a new pan-indigenous, collective subject in which women's leadership is emerging and growing, defining the women as outspoken, strong and clear agents of change.

When I first approached the various documents that resulted from the Summit, I was surprised by the frequent use of the self-elected term 'spirituality'. Its meaning

in this context is by no means self-evident and needs to be decoded. It has little to do with what the word usually means in the Christian traditions, in which I include all denominations. When indigenous women use the word 'spirituality', they give it a meaning that clearly sets it apart from Catholic and other Christian traditions that arrived in the Americas at the time of the conquest and the ensuing colonisation:

We indigenous Mexican women ... take our decision to practise freely our spirituality that is different from a religion, but in the same manner we respect everyone else's beliefs. (*Summit 2002a*: 1)

*Las mujeres indígenas mexicanas...tomamos nuestras decisiones para ejercer libremente nuestra espiritualidad que es diferente a una religión y de igual manera se respeta la creencia de cada quien.* (*Summit 2002a*: 1)

A further vital element is that, until very recently, the term 'indigenous' had no positive connotations. It had never been used by the indigenous peoples themselves to indicate a self-constituted identity. Now it refers to a collective subjectivity, a social actor created by the indigenous people themselves through their political and spiritual practices. As workshop leader and consultant to indigenous peoples' organisations from several ethnic groups of Mexico and Latin America, I have witnessed these distinctive ties, their collective identity and the strength of their spiritual and cosmological references.

Whatever the possible explanations for the genesis of this pan-indigenous collective social subject might be, it engenders a political collectivity, and one of its cardinal claims is often based on its self-defined indigenous spirituality. Indigenous women are today reclaiming this ancestral wisdom, cosmovision and spirituality. Theirs is a selective process. Issues within the tradition that constrain or hamper their space as women are being contested. At the same time, issues that enhance the position of women in their ancestral spiritual communities are held onto dearly, and their survival is supported and ensured by the community.

I had the privilege of being invited to be one of the few 'nonindigenous' women participants at the meeting and a consultant for the formulation of their gender and empowerment documents that resulted from the conferences. The organisers knew of my research on ancestral Mesoamerican cosmology and activist work and expressed a desire to hear the opinion of a feminist who respects indigenous cultures.<sup>9</sup>

## The Contemporary Context

Despite conflicting views among scholars and other commentators, the indigenous social movements are the most visible transformational force on the Latin American continent (Touraine 2000). Indigenous peoples no longer accept the image that was imposed on them from the outside. They want to create their own identity; they refuse to be museum objects. It is not a question of reinventing the past. Indigenous

cultures are alive, and the only way for them to survive is to reanimate themselves, recreating their identity while maintaining their differences (Le Bot 2000).

The Latin American continent has long been a stronghold of Catholicism. Even today the Vatican counts Latin America as one of the regions that boasts the greatest numbers of Catholics in the world.<sup>10</sup> Among indigenous social movements, claiming the right to develop and define their own spirituality is a recent development, yet one that is voiced with increasing intensity.<sup>11</sup> Beyond claiming a right to food and shelter, a decent livelihood, and ownership of their territory and its resources, the indigenous people are turning inwards to their traditional culture. They are also daring to question the most ingrained attitudes of Catholic colonisation, ignoring the contempt in which their spirituality, beliefs and practices are often held by the Catholic majority. This 'assertion of a common past ... has been suppressed and fragmented by European colonialism and the emergence of modern liberal states. In this view, cultural revitalisation reunites the past with the present as a political force' (Warren and Jackson 2002: 11).

Addressing the Mexican Parliament in March 2002, *Comandanta* Esther, a Zapatista leader from the southern state of Chiapas, expressed indigenous women's concern; thus, 'I want to explain the situation of women as we live it in our communities ... as girls they think we are not valuable ... as women [we are] mistreated ... women have to carry water, walking 2–3 h holding a vessel and a child in their arms' (Marcos 2005: 103). After describing her daily hardships under indigenous customary law, she added 'I am not telling you this so you pity us. We have struggled to change this and we will continue doing it' (Marcos 2005: 103). She was expressing the dynamics of the inevitable struggle for change that indigenous women face, but she was also demanding respect for their agency. At the same time, it was the underpinning dimensions of women's spirituality that informed her presentation.

*Comandanta* Esther's discourse provides evidence that the daily life of indigenous peoples and their culture are neither monolithic nor static. 'We want recognition for our way of dressing, of talking, of governing, of organising, of praying, of working collectively, of respecting the earth, of understanding nature as something we are part of' (Cited in Marcos 2005: 103). In concert with many indigenous women who have raised their voices in recent years, she wants both to transform and to preserve her culture. This is the background to the demands for social justice expressed by indigenous women, against which we must view the declarations and claims concerning indigenous spirituality that emerged from the First Indigenous Women's Summit of the Americas.

Among the thematic resolutions proposed and passed unanimously at the First Indigenous Women's Summit, the following are particularly emblematic:

We re-evaluate spirituality as the main axis of culture. (*Summit* 2003: 61)

*Revaloramos la espiritualidad como el eje principal de la cultura.* (*Summit* 2003: 32)

The participants of the First Indigenous Women Summit of the Americas resolve: that spirituality is an indivisible part of the community. It is a cosmic vision of life shared by

everyone and wherein all beings are interrelated and complementary in their existence. Spirituality is a search for the equilibrium and harmony within ourselves as well as the other surrounding beings. (*Memoria*, 60)

*Las participantes de la Primera Cumbre de Mujeres Indígenas de America consideramos: que la espiritualidad está ligada al sentido comunitario de la visión cósmica de la vida, donde los seres se interrelacionan y se complementan en su existencia. Que la espiritualidad es la búsqueda del equilibrio y la armonía con nosotros mismos y con los demás.* (*Memoria*, 31)

We demand of different churches and religions to respect the beliefs and cultures of Indigenous peoples without imposing on us any religious practice that conflicts with our spirituality. (*Memoria*, 19)

*Demandamos de las diferentes iglesias y religiones respetar las creencias y culturas de los Pueblos Indígenas sin imponernos ninguna practica religiosa que contravenga nuestra espiritualidad.* (*Memoria*, 19)

The above words witness to the demands for social justice expressed by indigenous women, against which we must view the declarations and claims concerning indigenous spirituality that emerged from the First Indigenous Women's Summit of the Americas.

## The Bishops' Message to the Summit and the Women's Response

Reports on the Summit's preparatory sessions, combined with the public status of its main organiser, indigenous Nobel Peace Prize laureate Rigoberta Menchú, attracted the attention of the Mexican bishops. They apparently feared that the indigenous peoples [which they regard as part of their domain] were becoming rebellious. It was not only indigenous peoples, moreover, but indigenous *women* who were taking the lead and gaining a public presence. There were also rumours about 'reproductive rights' featuring as an item on the Summit's agenda. Catholic authorities spoke out against indigenous agitation. They felt it necessary to send a 'message' and a warning:

The Summit touches on indigenous peoples' spirituality, education and culture from perspectives such as traditional knowledge, loss and re-construction of collective and individual identities, and also from indigenous women's spirituality *from a perspective totally distant from the cultural and spiritual reality of the diverse ethnic groups that form our [sic] indigenous peoples.* (*Bishops' Message*, 2, emphasis added)

*La Cumbre aborda la espiritualidad, la educación y la cultura de los pueblos indígenas desde conceptos de conocimiento tradicional, perdida y reconstrucción de identidad individual y colectiva, así como espiritualidad de la mujer indígena, desde una perspectiva completamente alejada de la realidad cultural y espiritual de las diferentes etnias que forman nuestros [sic] pueblos indígenas.* (*Bishops' Mensaje*, 2, emphasis added)

This patronising message was sent to the Summit by the *Comision Episcopal de Indígenas* (Episcopal Commission for Indigenous People). Its tone is one of admonition to the indigenous ‘subject’. It assumes that rationality/truth is the prerogative of bishops. They consider it their duty to lead their immature indigenous women subjects: to teach them, guide them and scold them when they, the bishops, think the indigenous women are in the wrong.

The indigenous women’s response, *Mensaje de las Mujeres Indígenas Mexicanas a los Monseñores de la Comisión Episcopal de Indígenas*, emerged from a collective meeting.<sup>12</sup> Women represented the majority of the Mexican ethnic communities. Their native languages included Nahuatl, Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Tojolabal, Chol, Zapotec, Mixe, Mazatec, Mixtec and Purepecha. The gathering reflected the new collective subject that is taking the lead in struggles for social justice. Notwithstanding traditional ethnic divides among them, all the women involved chose to emphasise their commonalities and identify themselves as Mexican indigenous women. In this document the 38 representatives of Mexican indigenous communities expressed their situation as follows:

Now we can manifest openly our spirituality. Our ancestors were obliged to hide it.... It is evident that evangelization was an imposition and that on top of our temples and ceremonial centres churches were built. (*Summit 2002a*: 1)

*Ciertamente hoy podemos manifestar más plenamente nuestra espiritualidad, lo que no pudieron hacer nuestros antepasados porque lo hicieron a escondidas.... Para nadie es oculto de la imposición de la evangelización y que sobre la espiritualidad y centros ceremoniales se fundaron las iglesias en nuestros Pueblos. (Mensaje Mujeres Indígenas, 1)*

We Mexican Indigenous women are adults and we take over our right to practice freely our spirituality that is different from a religion ... we feel that we have the right to our own religiosity as indigenous peoples. (*Message from Indigenous Women to the Bishops*, 1–2)

*Las mujeres indígenas mexicanas somos mayores de edad y tomamos nuestras decisiones para ejercer libremente nuestra espiritualidad que es diferente a una religión... nos sentimos con derecho a ejercer ... nuestra religiosidad como pueblos indígenas. (Mensaje Mujeres Indígenas, 1–2)*

We reconfirm the principles that inspire us to recover and strengthen reciprocity, complementarity, and duality, to regain equilibrium. (*Message from Indigenous Women to the Bishops*, 1)

*Reconfirmamos nuestros principios que nos inspiran a recuperar y fortalecer la reciprocidad, complementariedad, dualidad para recuperar el equilibrio. (Mensaje Mujeres Indígenas, 1)*

Do not worry, we are analysing them [customary practices that could hamper human rights], because we believe that the light of reason and justice also illuminates us, and certain things should not be permitted. (*Message from Indigenous Women to the Bishops*, 1)

*No se preocupen, las estamos analizando [los usos y costumbres que atentan contra la dignidad y los derechos humanos], porque también creemos que nos ilumina la luz de la razón y la justicia. (Mensaje Mujeres Indígenas, 1)*

The last sentence is a veiled reference to centuries of colonial and post-colonial oppression. First the colonisers and then the modern state – both with the church’s approval – denied the indigenous peoples the qualification of *gente de razón*

('rational people'). Even today, in some parts of Mexico, this qualification is reserved for whites and mestizos.

The gathering reflected the new collective subject that is taking the lead in struggles for social justice. Notwithstanding traditional ethnic divides among them, all the women involved chose to emphasise their commonalities and identify themselves as Mexican indigenous women. They struggled with Spanish as they forged the language of their text. Editing the document took all of us into the early hours of the next day. It was finally passed by consensus, in which my 'non-indigenous' vote counted as any other, as it should in a consensus-building process.

In addition to constraints imposed by the multiplicity of languages, they expressed the profound dilemma of having to deal with a religious institution that, in spite of its evangelical roots, has traditionally been misogynistic. The women's insistence on being *adults* (*las mujeres indígenas mexicanas somos mayores de edad*) is a response to the assumption implicit in the bishops' message, namely, that not only women but all indigenous peoples in general are minors and, as such, in need of strict guidance and reprimand. The women's declaration, in both tone and content, also attests to the erosion, hopefully, of the church's dominion over indigenous worlds. This reclamation by the women of their own status and integrity, as well as that of all indigenous people, is a vital element in their quest to claim redress for all indigenous peoples who have been denied their rights. This could be appreciated as constituting a restorative gift connected to the recognition of a way of life that affirms a spiritual existence that can also coexist with a demand for justice in this world.

## Indigenous Spirituality

This section will be a description of some basic characteristics of indigenous spirituality. It is an invitation to understand it on its own terms. This deepening of understanding will facilitate a less oppressive relationship with the indigenous peoples, not only in society and politics but also in its indigenous spiritual domains.

I will first review some of the tenets of Mesoamerican ancestral 'embodied thought' (Marcos 1998), starting with duality, which is a basic term for a spirituality that is understood as a cosmic vision of life. Duality – not dualism – is pervasive in indigenous thought and spirituality. The pervasiveness of this perception, which has no equivalent in Western thought, could, perhaps, in itself explain the persistent failure to comprehend indigenous worlds.

Duality, as it is appreciated within a Mesoamerican indigenous epistemic approach, should not be understood as indicating antagonistic relations. It denotes 'a polarity of complementary opposites' – at once dynamic and constantly in movement – that seeks balance but is never static. At the same time, it does not initiate hierarchies or exclusions. Duality thus allows for a 'dual unity' of opposites, e.g. masculine and feminine, that can foster a creative encounter, rather than a hostile confrontation.

According to Mesoamerican cosmology, the dual unity of feminine and masculine is fundamental to the creation of the cosmos, as well as its (re)generation and sustenance. The intermingling of feminine and masculine in one bipolar principle is a recurring feature of almost every Mesoamerican community today. Divinities themselves are gendered: feminine and masculine. There is no concept of an omnipotent god, but rather a dual mother/father protector-creator. In Nahua culture this dual god/goddess is called *Ometeotl*, from *ome*, 'two', and *teotl*, 'god'. Yet *Ometeotl* does not mean 'two gods' but rather 'god Two' or, better, 'divinity of Duality'. The name results from the fusion of *Omecihuatl* (*cihuatl*, 'woman' or 'lady') and *Ometecuhli* (*tecuhli*, 'man' or 'lord'), that is, of the Lady and the Lord of Duality. This cosmology represents a world constructed by fluid dual oppositions, beyond mutually exclusive categories.

The protecting *Ometeotl* has to be alternately placated and sustained. Like all divine beings, it was not conceived of as purely beneficial. Rather, it oscillated – like all other dualities – between opposite poles and thus could be either supportive or destructive. At the same time, a multiplicity of goddesses and gods entered into diverse relations of reciprocity with the people. Elsewhere I have dealt more comprehensively with the gods and goddesses of the Mesoamerican cosmovision (Marcos 2006: 33–37). Scholars recognise that the spirituality of the entire Mesoamerican region is redolent with similar symbolic meanings, rituals and myths concerning the condition of supernatural beings and the place of humans in the cosmos. One of the most eminent of ethnohistorians, Alfredo López Austin (2001), refers to this commonality of perceptions, conceptions and forms of action as the *núcleo duro*, the hard core of Mesoamerican cultures:

Duality is something we live through, it is there ... we learn of it within our spirituality and we live it in ceremonies, we live it when we see that in our families, women and men, mother and father take the decisions. (Candida Jimenez, Mixe indigenous woman, *Summit* 2002b: 6)<sup>13</sup>

*La dualidad es algo que se vive, que se da...nos la enseñan en la espiritualidad y lo vivimos en la ceremonia, lo vivimos cuando vemos familias en las que las mujeres y los hombres, el papa y la mama deciden.* (Candida Jimenez, Mixe indigenous woman, *Summit Doc. Genero* 6)

Duality, defined as a complementary duality of opposites, is also the essential ordering force of the universe and is also reflected in the ordering of time. Time is marked by two calendars, one ritual based and the other astronomical. The ritual calendar is linked to the human gestation cycle, that is, the time needed for a baby to be formed in the mother's womb. The other is an agricultural calendar that prescribes the periods for seeding, sowing and planting corn. Maize (corn) is conceived of as the earthly matter from which all beings in the universe are made (Marcos 2006). Human gestation and agricultural cycles are understood in terms of this concept of time duality, as are feminine and masculine, but dualities extend far beyond these spheres. For instance, life and death, above and below, light and dark, and beneficence and malevolence are considered dual aspects of the same reality. Neither pole invalidates the other. Both are in constant mutual interaction, flowing



into one another. Mutually exclusive categories are not part of the epistemic background to this worldview, whose plasticity is still reflected in the way indigenous women deal with life and conflict. They seldom remain stuck in a position that would deny its opposite. Their philosophical background allows them to resist impositions and at the same time to incorporate modern elements into their spirituality. Fluidity and selectivity in adopting novel attitudes and values attest the ongoing reconfiguration of their frame of reference.

The principle of fluid duality has held indigenous worlds together over the centuries. It has been both concealed and protected by its incomprehension to outsiders. The 'hard core' of indigenous cultures has been a well-kept secret. Even today, among many native communities in the Americas, revealing this secret background to outsiders is considered a betrayal of the community.<sup>14</sup> It is only recently that indigenous women themselves have started to disclose it. Today, some indigenous women and men are becoming vocal proponents of their religious and philosophical heritage and have agreed to articulate and share it with the outside world.

## Duality and Gender

In the indigenous Mesoamerican world, gender is constructed within the pervasive concept of duality (Marcos 1998, 2006). Gender, that is masculine/feminine duality, is the root metaphor for the whole cosmos. Everything is identified as either feminine or masculine, and this applies to natural phenomena such as rain, hail, lightning, clouds; living beings: animals, plants and humans; and even to periods of time such as days, months and years (López Austin 1988). All these entities have a feminine or masculine 'breath' or 'weight'. It is evident, then, that this perception of gender corresponds to a duality of complementary opposites, which in its turn is the fabric of the cosmos. Within this framework, gender is conceptualised as moving and in permanent flux between both poles: male and female. Thus, any transgender, bisexual, homosexual, queer and gender ambiguities are considered to be a pause, an instant and a moving stop within the flux between both dimorphic extremes.

Duality is thus the linking and ordering force that creates a coherent frame of reference for indigenous peoples and the knitting yarn that weaves together all apparent disparities, including gender (Quezada 1997; Marcos 1993).

The Women's Summit of the Americas documents foreground and help to explain the concept that duality is also a basic referent of indigenous spirituality:

To speak of the gender concept presupposes the concept of duality emerging from the indigenous cosmovision ... the whole universe is ruled by duality: the sky and earth, night and day, sadness and happiness, they complement each other. The one cannot exist without the other. (*Summit Doc. Género*, 6)

Everything is ruled by the concept of duality, certainly men and women. (*Memoria*, 231)

*Hablar del concepto de género supone remitirse al concepto de dualidad manejado desde la cosmovisión indígena ... ya que todo el universo se rige en términos de dualidad: el cielo y la tierra, la noche y el día, la tristeza y la felicidad, se complementan el uno al otro. (Summit Doc. Género, 6)*

*Todo se rige en términos de Dualidad, indudablemente, el hombre y la mujer. (Memoria, 231)*

Yet despite the reverential espousal of the ancestral concept of gender duality and complementarity, contemporary indigenous women express some reticence and even rejection of certain aspects. Their arguments are based on the way people live today in many indigenous communities that have been influenced by the gendered arrangements of the colonisers who introduced misogynistic ideas and practices. For example, in the Summit document dedicated to 'Gender from the perspective of indigenous women', Maria Estela Jocón, a Mayan Guatemalan wise woman, remarks that duality today:

*[I]s something we should question, it is a big question mark, because as theory it is present in our cosmovision and in our customary laws, as theory, but in practice you see many situations where only the man decides ... mass media, schools and many other issues have influenced this principle of Duality so it is a bit shaky now. (Summit Doc, Género, 7)*

*La Dualidad hoy en día es cuestionante, es un signo de interrogación grandísimo, porque como teoría existe en nuestra cosmovisión y en nuestras costumbres, como teoría, pero en la práctica se ven muchas situaciones donde solamente el hombre decide. ... los medios de comunicación, la escuela y muchos otros elementos han influido para que ese principio de la Dualidad esté un poquito tambaleante. (Summit Doc. Género, 7)*

Alma Lopez, a young self-identified indigenous feminist, who is a *regidora* [municipal authority] in her community, believes that the concept of duality of complementary opposites has been lost:

The philosophical principles that I would recover from my culture would be equity, and complementarity between women and men, women and women, and between men and men. Today the controversial complementarity of Mayan culture does not exist. (Duarte and Ixkic 2002: 278)

*Los principios filosóficos que yo recuperaría de mi cultura son la equidad, la complementariedad entre hombres y mujeres, entre mujeres y mujeres, entre hombres y hombres... Actualmente esa famosa complementariedad de la cultura maya no existe. (Duarte and Ixkic 2002, 178)*

Nonetheless, beyond their reticence or even radical questioning of certain contemporary and lived practices of inherited philosophical principles, indigenous women still claim them, still want to be inspired by them and still propose to reinstate them in their contemporary struggles for gender justice. They deem it necessary not only to recapture their ancestral cultural roots and beliefs but also to see them as a potent resource in their quest for gender justice and equity:

Today there are big differences between the conditions of women in relation to that of men. This does not mean that it was always like this. In this case there is the possibility of returning to our roots and recovering the space that is due to women, based on indigenous cosmovision. (Memoria, 133)

*En la actualidad existen grandes diferencias entre la situación de la mujer con relación a la del hombre, no significa que siempre fue así, en este caso existe la posibilidad de retomar las raíces y recuperar el espacio que le corresponde a la mujer basado en la cosmovisión indígena. (Memoria, 133)*

The Summit document, dedicated to gender, has the subtitle: *De los aportes de las mujeres indígenas al feminismo* (Indigenous women's contributions to feminism). In this portion of the document, too, women cast off their role as recipients of a feminism imposed on them by outsiders and instead proclaim that their feminist vision has contributions to offer other feminist approaches.

In addition to duality, they view the concepts of *parity* and *equilibrium* as important contributions. The first paragraph of the document explains that:

[S]ome key aspects of indigenous movements have to be emphasized. They are the concepts of duality, equilibrium and harmony with all the implications we have mentioned already. (*Summit Doc. Género*, 31)

*... puntualizar algunas visiones de equilibrio, dualidad y armonía, con todas las implicaciones anteriormente citadas. (Summit Doc. Género, 31)*

It also makes a proposal:

[t]o all indigenous peoples and women's movements [of] a revision of cultural patterns ... with the objective of propitiating gender relations based on equilibrium. (*Summit Doc. Género*, 37)

*A todos los Pueblos Indígenas y movimientos de mujeres indígenas, revisión de los patrones culturales con capacidad autocrítica, con el fin de propiciar unas relaciones de género basadas en el equilibrio. (Summit Doc. Género, 37)*

The Mesoamerican indigenous women face the same problem as many other peoples today who are undertaking projects of decolonisation and trying to establish exactly what to reclaim and what to reject from a distant past. Over the centuries, cultures have been in a constant state of flux. Any present-day investigation involves searching for consistent sediments across time. The Mesoamerican women, in particular, are dealing with orally transmitted religious beliefs and practices that still exist today. From a certain perspective, the gendered arrangements of the colonisers were one sort of male dominance that was different from those of the colonised. Even though one can never be totally sure of an exact differentiation, Mesoamerican women, however, do want to recuperate aspects of their indigenous ideas, especially those such as duality, equilibrium, parity and complementarity, because they claim these have been lost in contact with the colonisers.

## Equilibrium and Gender Equity

Equilibrium, as conceived in indigenous spirituality, is not the static repose of two equal weights or masses. Rather, it is a force that constantly modifies the relation between dual and opposite pairs. Like duality itself, equilibrium or balance permeates not only relations between men and women but also relations among deities,

between deities and humans, and among elements of nature. The constant search for this balance was vital for the preservation of order in every sphere, from daily life to the operation of the cosmos. Equilibrium is as fundamental as duality itself.

Duality, then, is not a binary ordering of 'static poles'. Balance in this view can best be understood as an agent that constantly modifies the terms of dualities and thereby bestows a singular quality on the complementary pairs of opposites that permeate all indigenous thought (as seen in the Summit documents and declarations). Equilibrium is constantly re-establishing its own balance. It endows duality with flexibility or plasticity that makes it flow, impeding stagnation. There is no exclusively feminine or exclusively masculine being. Rather, beings possess these forces in different degrees or combinations. The imperceptible 'loading' or 'charge' that all beings – whether rocks, animals or people have – can be either feminine or masculine. Frequently entities possess both feminine and masculine propensities simultaneously in different gradations that perceptibly change and shift (López Austin 1988).

The gender documents of the Women's Summit were direct transcriptions of the focus group discussions. The following rich and spontaneous evaluations of equilibrium express the indigenous conception of gender equity:

We understand the practice of gender perspective to be a respectful relationship ... of balance, of equilibrium – what in the Western world would be equity. (*Summit Doc. Género*, 6)

*Se entiende así la práctica de enfoque de género como una relación respetuosa, ... de balance, de equilibrio-lo que en occidente sería de equidad. (Summit Doc. Género, 6)*

Equilibrium means taking care of life ... when community values of our environment and social community are respected, there is equilibrium. (*Memoria*, 132)

*El equilibrio es velar por la vida... Cuando los valores de la comunidad, de nuestro medio social y de nuestro entorno son respetados hay equilibrio. (Memoria, 132)*

Indigenous women refer to equilibrium as an ideal that is attainable for the whole cosmos. They also appreciate it as the best way to express their own views of gender equity.

## A Spirituality of Immanence

In the fluid, dual universe of indigenous spiritualities, the domain of the sacred is all-encompassing. This view of the sacred nurtures strong continuities between the natural and the supernatural worlds, whose sacred beings are closely interconnected with humans, who, in turn, perpetuate this interdependence in all their activities. Enacting this principle at the Summit, every single activity started with a sensuous, embodied ritual. The women from Latin American indigenous communities woke up early in the morning. The sounds of the early morning sacred ritual were a reminder that I was a guest in an indigenous universe. The processions and chants were led by a couple of Mayan ritual specialists: a woman and a man. Nothing ever started, at this United Nations-sponsored meeting, without rhythmic sound and

chants, offerings of *copal* (a sort of Mexican incense), fruits, flowers and coloured candles to the four compass points of the universe. The sacred indigenous world was present:

The cosmic vision of life is to be connected with the surroundings, and all the surroundings have life, so they become SACRED: we encounter earth, mountains, valleys, caves, plants, animals, stones, water, air, moon, sun, stars. Spirituality is born from this perspective and conception in which all beings that exist in Mother Nature have life and are interrelated. Spirituality is linked to a sense of COMMUNITY in which all beings are interrelated and complementary. (*Memoria*, 128)

*La visión cósmica de la vida es estar conectado con el entorno y todo los que hay en el entorno tiene vida, por lo que adquiere un valor SAGRADO: encontramos tierra cerros, planicies, cuevas, plantas, animales, piedras, agua, aire, luna, sol, estrellas. La espiritualidad nace de esta visión y concepción en la que todos los seres que hay en la Madre Naturaleza tienen vida y se interrelacionan. La espiritualidad está ligada al sentido COMUNITARIO, donde los seres se interrelacionan y se complementan.* (*Memoria*, 128)

Such a spirituality also fosters women's own relation to the cosmos.

That the indigenous women of different cultures and civilisations of Abya Yala [the preferred term used by native peoples of the Americas for their continent<sup>15</sup>] do not forget that they are daughters of the land, of the sun, of the wind and of fire and that their continuous relation with the cosmic elements strengthens their political participation in favour of indigenous women and indigenous peoples. (*Memoria*, 63)

*Que las mujeres indígenas de las diferentes culturas y civilizaciones de Abya Yala no se olviden que son hijas de la tierra del sol, del viento y del fuego y que su relación continua con los elementos cosmogónicos fortalecerá su participación política a favor de las Mujeres indígenas y de los Pueblos indígenas.* (*Memoria*, 34)

## Embodied Thought

According to dominant Western epistemic traditions, the very concept of the body is formed in opposition to mind. The body is defined as the place of biological data, of the material and of the immanent. Since the seventeenth century, the body has also been conceptualised as that which marks the boundaries between the interior self and the external world (Bordo and Jaggar 1989: 4). In Mesoamerican spiritual traditions, on the other hand, the body has vastly different characteristics from those of the Western anatomical or biological body (Gebara 2004). In the Mesoamerican view, exterior and interior are not separated by the hermetic barrier of the skin. Between outside and inside, there is a permanent and continuous exchange. For a clearer understanding of how the body is conceptualised in indigenous traditions, we must think of it as a vortex in whirling, spiral movement that fuses and expels and absorbs and discards, and through this motion, it is in permanent contact with all elements of the cosmos.

For indigenous peoples, then, the world is not 'out there', established outside and separate from them. It is within them and even 'through' them. Actions and their circumstances are much more interwoven than in Western thought, in which the 'I'

can be analytically abstracted from its surroundings.<sup>16</sup> The body's porosity, moreover, reflects the essential porosity of the cosmos, a permeability of the entire 'material' world that defines an order of existence characterised by a continuous interchange between the material and the immaterial. The cosmos literally emerges, in this conceptualisation, as the complement of a permeable corporeality. It is from this very broad perspective that indigenous women's use of the controversial term 'complementarity' should be examined. From their perspective it is not only feminine and masculine that are said to be complementary, but, as *Comandanta* Esther insisted in her address to the Mexican Congress, complementarity embraces everything in nature.

## A New Cosmovision

*Comandanta* Esther explained that earth is life and nature, and we are all part of it. This simple phrase expresses the interconnectedness of all beings in the Mesoamerican cosmos (López Austin 1988). Beings are not separable from one another. This principle engenders a very particular form of human collectivity with little tendency towards individuation. This sense of connectedness has been found consistently in contemporary indigenous medical systems and also in the first historical primary sources (López Austin 1988). As the 'I' cannot be abstracted from its surroundings, there is ongoing traffic between the inside and outside (Marcos 1998). Lenkesdorf (1999) interprets an expression in Tojolabal (a Mayan language of Chiapas): *Lajan, lajan aytik*. The phrase literally means *estamos parejos* ('we are all at the same level') but should be understood as 'we are all subjects'. Lenkesdorf maintains that this phrase conveys the intersubjectivity basic to Tojolabal culture.

Among the various examples of pervasive spiritual and cosmological references reproduced by the indigenous peoples of the Americas, this one seems to be crucial: the interconnectedness of everyone and everything in the universe, the intersubjective nature of men and women, interconnected with the earth, sky, plants and planets. This is how we must understand the defence of the earth 'that gives us life, that is the nature that we are', as *Comandanta* Esther explained to the legislators (Esther 2001):

"Indigenous peoples' spirituality," the Summit document declares, "revives the value of nature and humans in this century. The loss of this interrelationship has caused a disequilibrium and disorder in the world". (*Memoria*, 134)

*En la Espiritualidad de los pueblos indígenas se recupera el valor importante de la naturaleza y el ser humano... la pérdida de esta relación ha desatado una serie de desequilibrios en el mundo.* (*Memoria*, 134)

[A] Cosmic and conscious spirituality helps to re-establish equilibrium and harmony ... as women we have the strength, the energy capable of changing the course for a better communal life. (*Memoria*, 135)

*Una espiritualidad cósmica y consciente conduce al equilibrio, a la armonía ... Como mujeres tenemos la fuerza, la energía capaz de cambiar rumbos hacia una mejor vida comunitaria.* (*Memoria*, 135)

Spirituality emerges from traditional wisdom, but the document also stresses that 'we have to be conscious of the richness of the worldwide cultural diversity' (*Summit Doc. Género*, 31). Again we perceive a characteristic openness, a 'transnational' consciousness that has been influenced by women's movements and feminist practices.

## Conclusion

Contemporary indigenous women's initiatives to recover their ancestral spiritual heritage constitute a decolonising effort. By deconstructing past captivities, they recreate a horizon of ancestrally inspired spirituality. They lay claim to an ethics of recovery while rejecting the violence and subjugation suffered by their ancestors in the religious and cultural domain. 'We only come to ask for justice', the organised indigenous women have repeatedly declared. Yes, justice is their demand: material, social and political justice. They also seek recognition of and respect for their cosmological beliefs as an integral part of their feminist vision.

Within this cosmovision, women's bodies are valued in a different way. Most especially, their bodies are no longer regarded as being representative of flesh, sin and temptation as instilled by the colonisers. As a result of this negative influence, indigenous women were prevented from enacting their affirmation of life in this world. Reintroducing these ancestral attitudes and behaviours helps present-day indigenous women to pursue more constructive as well as activist lives. By reclaiming these earlier views and ways of inhabiting the world, today's indigenous women are not simply providing examples of affirmative living – which can be understood as a bequest that they have summoned, as it were, from their heritage. Their example can also be understood as a gift – as a balanced and celebratory mode of existence – to a world in danger of destroying itself. The gift that the indigenous women of Mesoamerica are offering other regions of the world is a vital and regenerative example to seek counsel in their respective rich legacies and current alternative developments to help restore equilibrium and balance.

## Notes

1. Hereafter FIWSA.
2. In attendance were women from remote and isolated places such as the Orinoco river delta in Venezuela, where there are no roads, and the Amazon River basin. Prior to the Summit, the organisers arranged a series of focus groups designed by the *Centro de Estudios e Información de la Mujer Multiétnica* (CEIMM) from the *Universidad de las Regiones Autónomas de la Costa Caribe Nicaragüense* (URACCAN), Nicaragua's indigenous university.



3. A definition of ethnic group included in the Convention n.169 of the ILO of the United Nations establishes that indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those groups who have a continuous history that originates from earlier stages to the presence of the invasion and colonisation. Groups that develop in their territories or part of it consider themselves different to other sectors of the society that are now dominant. These groups are today subaltern sectors, and they have decided to preserve, develop and transmit to the future generations their ancestral territories and their ethnic identity. These characteristics are fundamental to their existential continuity as peoples, in relationship with their own cultural, social, institutional and legal systems (in *Movimientos étnicos y legislación internacional*, Doc. UN, ICN,4I Sub. 2I 1989I33I Add.3 paragraph 4, in *Rincones de Coyoacan*, n.5, February–March 1994).
4. The terms ‘cosmovision’ and ‘cosmology’ are used interchangeably by the indigenous women of the Americas.
5. The wider movement of reclamation of indigenous movements and practices is known today as ‘decolonisation’. This essay, however, will focus only on the subject of the revitalisation of indigenous spirituality.
6. The reference here to globalisation implies its late-capitalist corporate model where, instead of gifts, it is basically motives of greed and profit that control the market. This is in stark contrast to the vision of the indigenous women of the Americas. There are numerous critiques of this orientation, including many Western scholars. See Dorrien (2010); Sassen (1999).
7. I will make extensive use of quotations from the *Memoria*, short for *Memoria de la Primera Cumbre de Mujeres Indígenas de América* (Summit 2002b), the raw material and transcriptions from the preparatory focus groups. This document, as well as official documents from the Summit, *Mensaje de las Mujeres Indígenas Mexicanas a los Monseñores de la Comisión Espiscopal de Obispos* (Summit 2002a) and *Género desde la Visión de las Mujeres Indígenas* (2003), varies in translation. Some are translated into English as part of the document, in which case the Spanish translation of a particular section has a different page number from the English. In some cases, the Spanish was not translated in the documents; this applies particularly to the position statements, whereas the declarations and plans of action are often in both Spanish and English in the documents. Unless indicated otherwise, I am responsible for all translations.
8. There are a number of fine ecofeminist books published by Catholic women who are also liberation theologians. See *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Gebara 2000) and Mary Judith Ress, *Reflexiones sobre el Ecofeminismo en America Latina* (2004).
9. See especially Marcos, *Taken from the Lips: Gender and Eros in Mesoamerica*. Leiden: Brill, 2006.
10. Over the past twenty years, the percentage of Catholics has decreased consistently. In Mexico today, roughly 82 % of the population identify themselves as Catholic, in contrast to 96.5 % two decades ago. The main source of Catholic believers used to be the impoverished and dispossessed of Mexico, who include the 62 distinct indigenous peoples in the country.

11. This theme resounds around the world among other indigenous peoples. See the Maori claims of Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999).
12. This document (*Summit 2002a*) was produced collectively after hours of proposals and debate. It was finally ratified by a consensus vote, the only truly 'democratic' way among indigenous peoples.
13. This document, *Documento Genero desde la Visión de las Mujeres Indígenas*, is listed in the bibliography as *Summit (2002b)*.
14. *Inés Talamantes*, a native American professor of religious studies who studies the ethnography of her own Mescalero Apache culture, once confided to me that she was forbidden by her community to reveal the deep meanings of their ceremonies.
15. There has not been a meeting where this term has been officially adopted. During most of the continental meetings of indigenous peoples, it has been accepted and used by the majority of them. Certain indigenous peoples may not use it, but it has become the common way to refer to America.
16. It is not as if all Western thought is monopolised by modes of Cartesian mind/body dualism. Over the centuries, philosophers such as Leibniz, Spinoza and Merleau-Ponty have proposed alternative approaches. There are numerous contemporary movements, such as deep ecology, the revival of animism, esotericism and various Western adaptations of Buddhist teachings, that witness to dissenting.

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# Chapter 6

## Embodied Divinity and the Gift: The Case of Okinawan *Kaminchu*

Noriko Kawahashi

### Introduction

In this paper I will discuss different dimensions of women in relation to the gift in the particular cultural and ethnic tradition called Okinawa. Okinawan religious tradition demonstrates the significance of the female-specific sphere, which affects the well-being of both females and males in society. The religious predominance of women is observed at multiple levels, as women are believed to serve as indispensable communicative links between humans and superhuman entities, especially deities. This paper focuses on the ritual role of divine priestesses (*kaminchu*) who generate and radiate benevolent spiritual forces for an entire village. By means of my ethnographic account, I hope to trace the role of the divine priestesses in Okinawa as the indispensable communicative link between humans and superhuman entities, to show how she embodies and radiates benevolent spiritual forces as “the gift” for the well-being of the whole village.<sup>1</sup>

By thus identifying the ways in which religiously defined gender attributes in Okinawa play out, I hope to undo arbitrary, androcentric, and universalist theses regarding the relationship of the woman and the gift such as what Morny Joy describes in the Introduction. There, Joy gives a critical account of conventional ways of situating women in relation to gifts in male-based systems, where they were arbitrarily considered mere objects of exchange or self-sacrificial and selfless givers (Joy 1999). On this point, I recall my conversation with a certain male professor of religion who had a strong Protestant background. I had returned from my fieldwork and was giving him an account of a traditional ritual in which villagers, both men and women, received cups of sake wine poured by the local divine priestesses. As I interpreted it, this was an act of receiving protective power from the female ritual

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specialists, who are believed to be endowed with the power to bless others in ritual settings. My enthusiasm was then countered by the male professor's extremely cynical remark that what I witnessed seemed hardly different from the conventional practice of having women serve men by pouring them sake wine. This appears to be a good example of the male-biased way of situating women in relation to gifts. It attempts to define women as selfless givers who do not have the potential to be ritual agents. At the same time in her Introduction, Joy calls our attention to ethnocentric, colonialist, and essentialist biases of Western researchers that may well be internalized equally by female researchers. In this connection, I further intend to show how the relationship between the woman and the gift can be, as Joy relates, subjected to such a biased interpretation, and I will critique a text by Susan Sered as a conspicuous case of just such an unfortunate undertaking.

## Setting the Issues in a Scholarly and Cultural Context

Okinawa Prefecture, one of the 47 prefectures of Japan, consists of the hundreds of islands of the Ryukyu Islands that form a chain about 900 km long extending southwest from Kyushu, the southwesternmost of Japan's four main islands, to Taiwan. It has a population of over 1.3 million. Okinawa used to be an independent nation known as the Ryukyu Kingdom that prospered as "the cornerstone of East Asia" until an invasion in 1609 by the Shimazu. This was the clan that controlled the feudal domain called Satsuma in southern Kyushu. The kingdom was annexed by the Japanese government in 1872, and in 1879 it was made into a prefecture of Japan. It has remained so except for a 27-year period following the end of World War II, when Okinawa was placed under United States administration on its reversion to Japan in 1972.

One distinctive characteristic of the Ryukyu Kingdom was a unity of religion and politics wherein the female domain of religion paralleled the male domain of politics in value. The two spheres were not independent or separate but functionally interdependent entities. Even after the kingdom was annexed by Japan and turned into a vassal state in the seventeenth century, the traditional ritual centrality of women showed great resilience in the face of change. What finally put an end to the unity of religion and politics in the kingdom was the establishment of Okinawa as a prefecture by the Japanese government in 1879. At that time, the order of female ritual specialists at the state level was abolished. Although the high-ranking priestesses of the former kingdom lost their emoluments and other state support, the new Meiji government found it expedient to preserve female religious specialists at the local community level so as to maintain the communal ties of the villagers. These female religious specialists have continued to exist on the local level up to the present, and the following section will show how these women have continued to exercise control over the still-important cultural resource that is religion.

This section discusses the history of an Okinawan cultural pattern in which the viable principle of a religiously defined female tradition is deeply embedded.

W. P. Lebra makes the following insightful observation about Okinawa's traditional Ryukyu kingdom: "[T]he whole of the kingdom was organized for religious as well as political ends.... This was not a pluralistic state but rather a single system composed of two mutually complementary facets: *a religious hierarchy of females paralleling a political hierarchy of males*" [italics mine] (Lebra 1966: 72).

The uniqueness of the Ryukyu Kingdom in Okinawa lays in the unity of religion and politics, which consisted of complementary roles for men and women. This complementarity of two genders has attracted the attention of many scholars. Rodney Needham, for example, presents the Okinawan case as one of his exemplars of dual sovereignty, which he takes to be rooted in a universal mode of symbolic classification. In Needham's description, the king as wielder of temporal power and the priestess as mediator of spiritual authority composed a "complementary opposition" (Needham 1980: 64–84).

Under this dual form of sovereignty, communication with the supermundane realm called for a gender-specific role specialization. Virtually every female in Okinawa is believed to be endowed with a superhuman quality of some kind. Kuratsuka Akiko, for example, explains that the uniqueness of the dual politico-religious structure in the kingdom of Okinawa is attributed to the superhuman power that was believed to be embodied in and transmitted only through females. The king found his well-being and success as a wielder of political authority, immediately dependent on the spiritual sustenance granted by the priestess (Kuratsuka 1979: 174).

Okinawan creation myths authorize the complementary division of roles between genders. Sakihara Mitsugu's comprehensive account shows how several versions of the creation myth establish that the first female was a divine priestess, while the first male was a political ruler (Sakihara 1987: 14–32). The most elaborate version appears in the first official history of Okinawa, *Chūzan sekan* (Iha et al. 1962). According to this myth, a son and a daughter of the heavenly deity became the first ancestral couple of the kingdom. The lineage is narrated as follows:

Though there was no consummation of the Yin and Yang between them, because their residences stood side by side, the passing wind became instrumental in the pregnancy of the female. Finally, three sons and two daughters were born. The eldest son was the progenitor of the masters of the country [kings]. His was called the lineage of Tenson-shi [lineage of the Heavenly Grandson]. The second son was the progenitor of the local lords [the *anji*]. The third son was the progenitor of the commoners. The first daughter was the progenitor of the high priestesses associated with the royal family, called *kikoe-ōgimi*. The second daughter was the progenitor of the priestesses of the local community, called *noro*. (Sakihara 1987: 26)

The myth is striking in the peculiar way it legitimates women's sacred status; i.e., the myth seems to emphasize that female descendants are by nature defined as religious authorities while male descendants are defined as secular rulers. Considering the fact that the myth was authorized by the state, one may interpret the myth as a significant expression of the relationship between women and the state in Okinawa at that time. As Moore holds, a process of institutionalization of women's place in a society is the result of state policies "which are themselves formulated according to

various assumptions about the nature of women and men as individuals, and about the nature of gender relations” (Moore 1988: 184).

The myth served the culture on two levels. First, it demonstrates the explicit separation of gender roles, and second, it emphasizes the role of the religious ideology as a key in maintaining the structures of the state. In brief, the Ryukyu Kingdom operated with a diarchical system based on the unity as well as the separation of religion and politics. As will be discussed later, the Okinawan kingship was dependent on an elaborate set of rituals that functioned to legitimate the kingship, and the divine priestess was both “legitimizing” and “protector” of the king. The pervasive cultural construction is that men are taken to be dependent on women’s protective and benevolent power and that men can only borrow the power emanating from women, a power which they themselves are not capable of domesticating. This divine power is defined by the indigenous term *seji* or *shiji*. W. P. Lebra explains this concisely:

The physical and charismatic power of the male leader supposedly was directly dependent on possession of strong *shiji*, and his *shiji*, which could be expended or diminished, required constant renewal and replenishment. As only females had the power to invoke and attach *shiji*, these men were dependent upon a close female relative who could be trusted to confer and sustain their *shiji*; most commonly this task was charged to a sister or perhaps a wife. (Lebra 1966: 101–2)

The thesis of a unity of religion and politics (*saisei itchi*) was originally proposed by Iha Fuyu in his work on the ancient political organization of Okinawa. Iha, by tracing the implications of the female predominance in ritual, came to recognize the importance of the female domain of religion that parallels the male domain of politics (Iha 1977). The impact of rituals on kingship has attracted attention from many scholars. For example, David Cannadine writes that indeed “there is more to political life than elections and party management” and that “symbolics of power” are central to the structure of society (Cannadine 1987: 3, 6). The workings of such a cosmic hierarchy were thus deployed by the earthly rulers as a means of ordering the mundane realms.

## An Alternative to Universalist Theses

The case of Okinawa I have been relating here overturns universalist theses of the relationship of women and ritual. It has recently been pointed out that previous theoretical paradigms for interpreting ritual have been based on a male model that serves to “exclude women’s ritual practice as necessarily marginal or nonexistent” (O’Grady 1999: 847). For example, there seems to be a widely shared universalist generalization as to female religious roles and status. In 1980, Rosaldo claimed that:

Women may have ritual powers of considerable significance to themselves, as well as men, but women *never* dominate in rites requiring the participation of the community as a whole [emphasis added]. (Rosaldo 1980: 395)



This observation is contradicted by evidence of the complete female predominance as ritual officiants in Okinawa. Anyone who visits Okinawan villages on major festive occasions will be struck by the fact that men as well as women take it for granted that divine priestesses officiate in rituals. That is, villagers as a whole find relevance in female-led rituals. It seems to me that Rosaldo's statement is haunted by the familiar oppositions of nature/culture and domestic/public. Her playing down of women's importance in the sphere of religion seems, in the first place, to derive from her a priori assumption that the men's sphere is everywhere the locus of "cultural" value while the women's sphere is of lesser prestige and importance. Therefore, she believes that when women appear to be active in the domain of religion, they do not have legitimate cultural authority. At most, she grants them informal power (Rosaldo 1980: 21).

In the second place, these flaws in Rosaldo's argument are further coupled with a kind of secularist bias. Put differently, Rosaldo seems to hold a view that simply identifies "politico-economic" activities with "public" and hence "more prestigious" and "religious" activities with "private" and hence "less important." She fails to take into account that other traditions might align the paradigmatic relationship between these dichotomies and certain values in a way quite distinct from Western models. The presumed distinction between the social good of men and the self-interest of women does not hold true everywhere. As I will explain, religion in Okinawa is a gendered domain in which the females are undoubtedly regarded as religious specialists and not the men. Religion is an important social good, yet is not monopolized by men. We must recognize that in some traditions, women's sphere of activities clearly carries moral import for the whole of society.

Moreover, this situation calls into question another widely appropriated claim about women's religious lives. The well-known hypothesis of I. M. Lewis analyzes women's religion as a subversion of or as an alternative to the dominant form of religion controlled by men. In this opinion, women and other subordinate categories take part in cults "peripheral" to the main religious cult in which men's actions are evaluated (Lewis 1986: 45; see also Lewis 1971). The socially oppressed attain cathartic experience in religion, he explains. His thesis is questioned by Kendall, who points out, for example, in her study of Korean women shamans, that there seems to be much more than a vague catharsis going on in women's religious experience (Kendall 1988: 12). Vincent Crapanzano likewise criticizes Lewis's generalization as unconvincing and requiring more sensitive analyses of context-specific cases (Crapanzano 1977: 20). In many traditions, certain forms of religious life and practice have been, in fact, a major sphere of activity for women.

It is my contention that in Okinawa, religion is an important resource of cultural value and respect for women, rather than for men. While this resource is reserved for women, this fact does not presuppose the prior existence of a male-dominated religion that is to be subverted by female activities: Okinawan men as well as women acknowledge women's leadership in religion. By incorporating this fact into our perspective, we may learn to define female power in a new light. Power can take on diverse forms. That is, the simple secular political definitions of power that are conventionally used as criteria for measuring power may not be exhaustive.

## Female Predominance in Ritual

The cultural sources of power of Okinawan women, which are traditionally defined as their own, have a religious basis. Consequently, female status becomes visible primarily in the centrality of females in ritual. I maintain, therefore, that we should not limit our discussion of power to concepts concerning the social order, but must include the cosmic order and relation to religious powers as well. Obviously, the degree to which the female gender has played a significant role in a given religious tradition varies from one culture to another. In some traditions, it may occupy a central place in generating major forms of piety and practice. In other traditions, it may be peripheral to masculine symbolism. Or the female principle and the male principle may be aligned to maintain a state of equilibrium. In a culture such as Okinawa's, where women are believed to be capable of blessing others in ritual, religion serves as an efficacious factor that sanctions female power in general. Their relatively high status seems less vulnerable to change where it is part of a long-standing cultural configuration, reinforced by such factors as a religious system or legal titles. Religion may significantly affect how women perceive the world and their place in it and how they are perceived by others.

## Body and Soul in Okinawa: The Accession Rite

I would now like to examine here how divine priestesses disseminate blessings to the villagers in the form of a gift in the actual ritual context. First, however, the source of the divine priestesses' power will be examined. The accession rite for the divine priestess has a particular structure: It is understood that the tutelary deity descends upon the divine priestess. This is simultaneously taken to be the occasion for rebirth of the deity. The divine priestess, through this ceremony, acquires an ability to distribute or share the blessing of *seji/shiji* (divine power) to other humans. In order to understand the significance of the accession rite, I will first discuss the Okinawan concepts of soul and body.

According to the local exegesis, the descent of the tutelary *kami* or deity takes the form of "soul intrusion." In Okinawa, a spirit or soul is called *mabui*. Lebra explains the nature of *mabui* as follows:

Every person possesses a vital, life-sustaining spirit called *mabui*.... The location of *mabui* is in the chest, and a sudden shock, surprise, sneeze, or fright (such as from seeing a ghost) may dislodge it from the body.... Since loss of *mabui* will cause death, ritual practice called *mabui-gumi* (putting in *mabui*) should be resorted to whenever loss of *mabui* is presumed to have occurred. (Lebra 1966: 25)

It could be added that people are generally believed to have more than one *mabui* in their bodies, usually several, and that the aperture from which a soul slips out of the body is located in the back (see Akamine 1989: 421–22). This type of body–soul relationship suggests first a belief that the body is a container for the soul, which is easily separable from the body and, second, that since the soul is separable, it is also

possible to implant a soul from outside. These points have significant implications for the nature of the accession rite.

In the accession rite, a divine priestess “embodies” the *kami*-soul (deity-soul) of her tutelary deity, which descends upon her. This soul is an essential source of her divinity. At the time of the embodiment’s death, the soul of the protective deity departs the body and keeps transmigrating forever in other forms of temporary hosts. To put this differently, a divine priestess embodies a particular tutelary deity through ritual means. This embodiment is believed to enact a rebirth of the same deity that was embodied in her predecessors. In this sense, what marks a crucial distinction between an ordinary human person and a divine one is the entering of a sacred *kami* (deity)-soul into the body of the divine priestess. This tutelary soul is not inherent in the divine priestess, but is inherited from her predecessor by means of the accession rite, *hansaga*, which literally means “descent of *kami*.”

One of the divine priestesses told me, for example, that she became a divine priestess by being possessed by the *kami* power. The phrase she used was “*kami no motsu chikara ga noriutsutte kami ni naru.*” This means that the power possessed by the *kami* is transferred to a person, who then becomes a *kami*. The *kami*-soul and its power appear as inseparable, and thus the exerciser of *kami*-power is the *kami* herself. The power-charged relationship between the divine priestess and the deity she embodies is, in my opinion, visible in the act of *aichē* (cooperation). Nakamatsu explains that each *kami* in Okinawa has a specific type of *seji/shiji* (divine power) functioning for a specific purpose (Nakamatsu 1990: 12). As such, it is assumed that cooperation among various *kami* is effective and sometimes mandatory. In other words, a particular *seji/shiji* blessing power can be combined with another *seji/shiji* power in order to secure a more favorable outcome (Nakamatsu 1990: 13–14). Human beings are dependent on the communication between various deities to receive this multiple *seji/shiji* power. The act of *aichē* or cooperation between deities has a significant implication for the human-deity-like nature of the divine priestess.

I maintain that the divine priestess, when she makes invocations, is acting as a living deity herself by asking for cooperation from other deities in order to supplement a specific divine blessing power that is lacking in her. She is more than a “priestess” who simply mediates between humans and deities. Her act of *aichē* with other deities is based on the very fact that she herself embodies a deity.<sup>2</sup> On this point, Mōshi-san, a local *uchigami* or divine priestess, who was one of my key informants, gave me the following account:

Each *kami* has a separate role, and we have to specify which *kami* we are calling upon in making an invocation. For instance, when I pray to the *kami* of the *utaki* (sacred grove), first I give the *kami* of the *utaki* a salutation saying that I, the *uchigami* [referring to Mōshi-san herself in her divine capacity], have come to talk to the *kami* of the *utaki*. Then when I actually make *ugan* (prayer), I say that this is an *ugan* by an *uchigami*, so if you, the *kami* of the *utaki*, find something that *uchigami* has left out, please add it to the prayer with your power.

As previously noted, the *kami* of Okinawa are benevolent manifestors of blessing power, which is concerned about the well-being of humans. As one of the *kami*, a divine priestess is a loving nurturer who shares as much concern for villagers as any other deity. A divine priestess as a living deity engages in the act of *aichē* with other deities to help humans.

## The *Ungami* Ritual

The remaining parts of the paper describe certain village ceremonies where the ability of the divine priestess to spread the divine blessing power of the gift to other humans can be witnessed in crystallized form. In many parts of northern Okinawa, the summer *ungami* (or *unjami*) ritual is the occasion par excellence for festivity in which the divine priestess may most fully manifest her ability to transfer the divine gift.

In a village that I will refer to as Castletown, the *ungami* starts on the first day of the boar animal sign that falls after the *bon* ancestral rite in July.<sup>3</sup> The *hansaga* accession ritual, as was just described, is performed just before the day of the *ungami* ceremony.<sup>4</sup>

In brief, *ungami* is a ritual of receiving the visiting deity from the other world of *niraikanai* (the land of abundance and luck across the sea) as well as calling upon the deity of mountains from the village's sacred grove, so as to pray for a good outcome: abundance, prosperity of offspring, and eradication of evil spirits. The world of *niraikanai* is pictured as a peaceful other world of *kami* from which fertility and fortune are brought to humans, and the *kami* of *niraikanai* is therefore a deity who brings abundance and plenitude across the ocean.<sup>5</sup> In a contemporary village, the *ungami* starts with a prayer by a group of divine priestesses dressed in white performed at the residence of the *noro*, the highest-ranking divine priestess of the village. I will first lay out the basic structure of the *ungami* ritual and then give an interpretation of its significance.

## Invocation to the Hearth Deity

After gathering at the residence of the *noro* (the highest-ranking local divine priestess), the divine priestesses from the five villages, as well as two male priests, proceed to the *ashagi* (ritual hut) in the sacred grove of Castletown. (In most cases, a male priest serves as a ceremonial aid accompanying a female *kaminchu* and does not make ritual invocations or bless others.)

As they ascend to the grove, boys of the village beat *kākā* (the ritual drum). In the sacred grove, Shigeyo-san and Nobue-san, both divine priestesses of Castletown, make ritual invocations in front of the hearth deity:

We the *kaminchu* (divine priestess) of all the five villages of Castletown, Providence, Perpetual, Wavebille, and Rejoice are here for the *ungami* ceremony with various offerings gathered from our villages. So please join us in our power as we make invocations for the welfare of every villager and for the prosperity of our villages.

Then each of the *kaminchu* takes his or her designated seat in the *ashagi* (ritual hut).

## ***Unaiugami: Worship of Women***

After the invocations are made, the laity, including the headmen of the satellite villages and those who come back to their natal village for this ceremonial occasion, form a line in front of the *ashagi* in order to receive blessing from the divine priestesses. One by one, the local men and women bow in front of the female *kaminchu* and receive from each of them a cup of *unsaku* (sake wine) that had previously been used as offerings. People are believed to stay healthy for the year by drinking the sake, which is poured by the divine priestess.<sup>6</sup> In the village of Port town, for example, the divine priestesses distribute to the villagers pieces of rice cake called *murimuchi* along with rice wine. I obtained an account from one of the villagers that this is called *hami-jikarawake* (distribution of *kami* power). As the elderly people told me, “If you take part in *ungami* and worship the *kaminchu*, you will be protected from seven kinds of bad luck.” Shigeyo-san explained to me that in this context, the villagers receive happiness and blessing through the power of the protective deity of *kaminchu*.<sup>7</sup> In the old days, the *noro* (the highest-ranking divine priestess) used to distribute *ishigui*, a twisted grass with a piece of stone in the loop to the people who came to worship her in the *ashagi*. People would take the *ishigui* to their home and dedicate it to the hearth deity, believing in its power to make them healthy.

## ***Festivity***

The divine priestesses next move to the courtyard in front of the *ashagi* (ritual hut) in order to perform a *kami ashibi* (deity play). This part of the ceremony is understood to be an entertainment shared among the divine priestesses, the villagers, and the deities they invite for *ungami*. First, they perform *yumiashibi* (bow play), in which divine priestesses used ritual bows as instruments to give thanks to the deities for having given them game animals, such as boars. Second, they perform *nawaas-hibi* (rope play), which is a performance using two ropes to imitate boat rowing. Boys of the village beat the drums and the divine priestesses swing the two ropes to the beat. In between these two entertainments, divine priestesses hold hands in a circle and circumambulate while chanting “*unkūi, unkūi*” (inviting luck) to ask for abundance and fertility. Shigeyo-san explained to me that upon the arrival of the deities at the *utaki* grove, female *kaminchu* would start the performance of the divine entertainment. Meanwhile, Atsumi-san, a divine priestess from Rejoice, throws handfuls of kelp and mandarin oranges to the audience. Kelp represents gifts from the sea, while mandarin oranges represent gifts from the mountains. Then the priestesses leave the *ashagi* for another site, which is located a little below the top of the grove to send off the deities.

## *Sending Off the Deity*

The deities of *nirai-kanai* (land of abundance across the sea) and of the mountains, who promise plenitude and fortune, are then sent back respectively to their world across the sea and to the sacred mountains. The divine priestesses pray, saying, “This year’s *ungami* was not as great as we had wished, but we made a promise for the next year that our *ungami* will be splendid. Please go ahead, our *kami*, and we will accompany you.”

## Summary and Interpretation

In order to understand what is happening in *ungami* ritual, it would help to recall the discussion of the source of the divine priestess’s divinity: A divine priestess is endowed with *seji/shiji* power, the blessings and protection of which can be distributed, by virtue of her inheritance of *kami*-soul, to others who are dependent on her care and benevolence. The villagers do not receive the deity embodied in the divine priestess itself. Rather, they receive the blessings – happiness and protection – that the divine priestess transmits through the power of her protective deity. This aspect was especially evident in the second stage of the ritual. The villagers are blessed and strengthened by the divine priestess’s endowment to transfer protective power to the offerings of *unsaku* or rice wine. To receive the offerings blessed by the divine priestess is to partake in her *seji/shiji* (divine power). Through this act, the blessings of her divine power are believed to be transferred into each villager’s body. The objects distributed by the divine priestess, be they the *ishigui* (stone) or *unsaku* (wine), may be taken as objectifications of her blessing and protective power.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the grounding of the divine power of *seji/shiji* is given back to the villagers as if it is a type of gift from the female *kaminchu*.

In discussing the nature of gifts, Marcel Mauss has said that a gift, when it is separated from the giver, nonetheless remains a part of the giver. By this he means that “to give something is to give a part of oneself” and that “to receive something is to receive a part of someone’s spiritual essence” (Mauss 1975: 10). I find that the ritual practice of gift receiving from living female deities exemplifies a particular significance attached to having a human embodiment of deity, as opposed to deities in stones or trees. In other words, since the carrier of such divine power takes a human form, humans and deities interact in a more personal and intimate way. The divine priestess is a vehicle for distribution of supernatural blessings. To put this differently, the body of a female *kaminchu* is a particularized locus of the sacred, and insofar as the sacred takes on a particularized human form, the concrete human-to-deity interaction that resembles human-to-human relationship is possible. This generates a feeling of intimacy between the laity and the deities.

Moreover, the next stage of the festivity illustrates the point that the role of the divine priestess in making invocations must not be construed as simply mediatory.

I maintain that she is asking for cooperation from other deities as a living deity herself. That is, the divine priestess in the ritual makes statements, not as a mere priestess, but as a deity in inviting the other deities to visit. Because *kami* in Okinawa is understood to be a benevolent manifestor of *seji/shiji* (divine power), the *kami* must activate a protective power for humans. At the same time, in order to enhance the welfare of humans, the tutelary deity embodied in a divine priestess must become animate. For this reason, they ask the visiting deities for fertility and abundance sufficient to sustain the village life for the coming year, on behalf of the villagers. This part of the ceremony indicates that, according to Okinawan religious ontology, some particular human beings are endowed with an ability to communicate powerfully with deities. That is, as an embodiment of deity herself, a divine priestess is capable of communicating with other deities of the universe. When the divine priestesses of Castletown chanted “*unkūi, unkūi*,” they were praying for the luck called *yū*, which is understood as whatever is closely related to fertility and prosperity.

In concluding this section, I want to emphasize again that in the Okinawan belief system, it is the female who is believed to be capable of inviting the luck and the power from above and absorbing and conceiving the divine power in her body and mediating it to other human beings. In other words, this ethnographic account indicates what I suggested at the outset that the relationship of the divine priestess and the “gift” is something more than can be accounted for by the simple relationship between the notion of the gift as either being given or the all giving as described by male ethnographers.<sup>9</sup>

## Gender and Ontology in Okinawa: A Problematic Interpretation

I have thus far demonstrated that the traditional religious culture of Okinawa has opted for a particular type of approach to spirituality in which divinity, incarnated in female form, plays an active role. The role that the human embodiment of divinity plays in this spiritual orientation varies from one religious tradition to another. At the core of the Okinawan religious tradition, as with the Japanese religious tradition, lies a particular conception of supernormal beings: *Kami* and humans are located on the same continuum. Historians of religion, however, have not treated this embodiment of divinity adequately. Joanne Waghorne, for instance, comments that the historians of religions have used a number of ways to escape confronting the paradoxical category of god as an embodied divinity. She explains that in the nineteenth century, Max Muller’s theory found unacceptable the idea of a category of being that was neither concrete object nor abstract spirituality (Waghorne 1981: 24–26). She maintains that in the twentieth century, discussion of divinity as a category of being that was neither physical nor spiritual was replaced by a more fashionable discussion of symbolism and that the study of divinity as incarnated in human form has virtually lost its place in the mainstream of the history of religions.



While Waghorne's assessment may somewhat overstate the case, it seems to me that few historians of religions have dealt with living divinities by doing justice to the perception held by certain individuals that their own worth and power may surpass those of ordinary humans. My account of Okinawan female ritual specialists or priestesses, who are believed to be capable of blessing other humans in ritual, is meant to contribute to the interpretation of divine human beings not only in Okinawa but also elsewhere in the history of religions.

Another anthropological account has been presented recently, however, that takes no cognizance of Okinawa's women in these significant cultural roles or in their function as spiritual guardians and that ignores the distinctive spiritual character of Okinawan culture and history. This is the account by Susan Sered, which has led to conflicting views. I remarked near the beginning of this article that conventional ethnocentric and colonialist interpretations originating from past studies by men have in some cases been replicated even by women researchers, and Sered's *Women of the Sacred Groves: Divine Priestesses of Okinawa* (1999) is a case in point.<sup>10</sup> This text has been severely criticized in Japan by the feminist scholar of literature Katsukata Inafuku Keiko, who is from Okinawa,<sup>11</sup> as well as by myself,<sup>12</sup> among others. Katsukata has written Sered's research on Okinawa: "She asked only about what she wanted, and treated anything else as background noise."<sup>13</sup> A declaration that is critical of Sered's work has been issued by an international group of Okinawan study specialists, of which I am a member.<sup>14</sup> The sad fact is, however, that her work on Okinawa appears to be gaining currency, and even a certain authoritative status, in the English-reading world.

I must observe, therefore, that Sered's book is quite problematic in that in many areas it shows a fundamental neglect of the literature and many of the basic themes of Okinawan research. This is nothing surprising, given the fact that she has little reading knowledge of Japanese. Equally problematic is Sered's blatant disregard of the villagers' awareness that their religious leaders are almost always women. She claims that they are not normally conscious of that fact, concluding that the villagers see "no existential link between womanhood and priesthood" (Sered 1999: 216).<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, according to Sered's observation, the villagers neither articulate the statement, "women dominate Okinawan religion," nor do they proclaim that one gender (female) has better access to the superhuman realm or existence (178; 215). On this point, many Okinawan specialists would also find Sered's contention unsupportable. Sered's line of argument is countered by Tanaka Masako, a specialist on Okinawan women and religion who has done extensive research and fieldwork in northern Okinawa. Tanaka writes that the legitimacy of the priesthood, in the true sense of the term, resides in women's hands because in Okinawa it is always women, not men, who can serve as the communicative link between humans and supernatural entities, including ancestral spirits. Men are not capable of performing ritual in the authentic manner without relying on women (Tanaka 1982: 239–40).

In short, Sered bases her whole argument on the presumed absence of gender as a significant symbolic category. Yet, strangely enough, Sered will present an interpretation that Okinawan priestesses are embodied divinities with the power to emit good spiritual energy, essentially the same thesis that I developed in my dissertation

in 1992 (Kawahashi 1992). Given her total lack of reference to any cosmological or ontological foundation, it is hard to account for this extremely rare phenomenon, in which an ordinary woman becomes an embodied divinity. Sered, however, only offers a surprisingly simplistic explanation to account for this extraordinary phenomenon. According to Sered, from a sociological perspective, this is a role-based division. That is to say, women's possession of religious leadership is a "function of what men and women do in specific contexts and not of what men and women are" (216). In other words, Sered links religious participation to conventional social roles, such as men tend to work outside while women stay home and thus have more time to spend on religion.

In sum, it would seem that Sered's approach is basically an anthropological or sociological one, using a functional method. It does not take into account the ontological understandings that inform Okinawan religious practices. The mythical and cosmological bases that inform such a worldview and its rituals are also given short shrift. As such, her work thus fails to do justice to the long tradition that has honored women as ritual specialists and divine intermediaries. As a result, Sered does not acknowledge, from the perspective of Religious Studies, the immense influence that religion exerts and its debt to an ancient spiritual Okinawan heritage. As a historian of religion, I strongly object to treating a belief and symbolic system as an epiphenomenon of sociocultural aspects of human activities. I sympathize with Victor Turner on this point. He held the belief that religion is not an epiphenomenon, but that it lies at the heart of the human matter because of its ontological value (Turner 1967). This study is therefore one illustration of the limitations that can occur, especially of a colonizing nature, if due consideration is not given to the beliefs and practices of a religious nature as they reflect a people's ontological worldview (Kawahashi 2000).

## Conclusion

In concluding, I would like to emphasize again that the particularity of Okinawan religious culture has much broader import and that it speaks to the experiences of many other peoples and cultures. Indeed, Okinawan women's religious experience may suggest fruitful avenues to reevaluate and redefine the place of the "gift" and female spirituality, which has been both ethnocentrically and androcentrically framed elsewhere. As such, it may serve as a source of encouragement and inspiration for many women scholars of religion.

There is also a theoretical concern regarding the study of women in religion that I would like to make explicit here, in relation to my research in Okinawan women's religious experience. This has to do with a certain feminist attitude toward religion. People have wondered whether the combination of religion and feminism is an oxymoron. Castelli speculates (2001: 5) that this kind of question may arise because of the influence on feminism of its own negative inheritance from Enlightenment thought, which privileged reason. The negative characterization of religion as a

product of false consciousness and the notion that religious salvation is a subtly disguised new form of oppression also arise in the context of an inability to perceive women as full agents in the arena of religion, that is, in other words, the difficulty of arguing for the possibility that women could be full agents in the religious sphere.

In her research on women who are Quakers, for example, Phyllis Mack makes a crucial observation about the agency of religious women. First of all, she reasons that since wisdom is an expression of individual autonomy, then as long as religion posits an authority that stands higher than the individual, “religious wisdom” must be an oxymoron. It is for similar reasons, she argues, that the term religion is not to be found anywhere in the index of a wide-ranging collection of essays discussing the subject of individual agency in relation to various fields of inquiry. It is because religion is antagonistic to the concept of agency, which is inextricably linked with the self-aware self-expression of the individual (Mack 2003: 150).

Mack argues that this insistence on autonomy and apathy toward religion is the product of a secularized metanarrative that is exercising a dominant influence. In other words, people who possess a passionate faith, or who are living within a religious system or discipline, end up being viewed as lacking in the agency that autonomous individuals in secular society do possess (Mack 2003: 153). Mack further states her expectation that many feminists would look askance at any agency said to be exercised by women who are agents in religion. Feminists who characterize adherence to a religion as a failure in self-worth or an internalization of oppressive social norms, for example, would find the possibility of women as religious agents to be untenable (Mack 2003: 157).

It is no easy matter to relativize the accounts of secular feminists who reduce all religion to a by-product of patriarchal ideology. It is also the case, however, that the refusal to listen and hear the accounts of women who have experienced self-realization and self-liberation through religion constitutes a betrayal of women.

In this paper, therefore, I have presented the specificity and particularity of Okinawan women’s religious experience for itself as a historical, spiritual reality and at the same time as a theoretical case in point. The tension between these two aspects should cast new light on women’s spirituality and women’s religious roles.

## Notes

1. This ethnography is based on my 1992 doctoral dissertation, *Kaminchu: Divine Women of Okinawa*.
2. I owe this insight to the late Professor Nakamatsu from our correspondence. See Nakamatsu (1990).
3. The *Bon* ritual which marks the return of the ancestral spirits starts on the 13th day and ends on the 15th day of the seventh lunar month. Elderly people of the village remember that when they were little, *ungami* used to last five days.

4. The four satellite communities of Castletown send their representative *kaminchu* to Castletown for the *ungami*, and each of those four villages performs its own *ungami* on the next day. The account here is a synthesized reconstruction from my observations in August of 1986, supplemented by a description of *ungami* in the village of Providence, which I visited with Shigeyo-san, one of the divine priestesses of Castletown.
5. There is no gender attributed to the deity of *nirai-kanai*. Although the term *ungami* is sometimes written with the Chinese characters for “sea god,” this ritual is not geared only to insuring a big catch of fish. It is the primary occasion in the year of prayer for fertility in general.
6. The act of receiving a cup of *unsaku* rice wine from the divine priestess is mandatory for the headman of the village at the *ungami* performed independently of Castletown. In Rejoice, for example, those former headmen whom I talked to took part in this act without fail while they served as headmen.
7. This act of receiving the blessing and protection from the female *kaminchu* is likewise performed at the patrilineal kin level. After the *ungami* is over, a divine priestess returns to the stem house of her patrilineal kin group and performs the same.
8. Stanley Tambiah’s analysis of the cult of amulets of Buddhist saints seems relevant on this point. He holds that the amulets are regarded by lay people as objectification of the saint’s virtues and supernormal powers, capable of advancing their worldly interests (Tambiah 1987: 123).
9. Recent work by the Norwegian anthropologist A. Røkkum has used the principle of the gift in Mauss to explain another interpretation of a gift in Okinawa. See Røkkum 2006.
10. In addition to *Women of the Sacred Groves*, Sered has published an abridged article version with all the footnotes removed that presents the same ideas as in her book in: “Okinawan Shamans and Priestesses” in *Shamanism: An Encyclopedia of World Beliefs, Practices and Culture*, edited by Mariko Namba Walter and Eva Jane Neumann Fridman (ABC-CLIO 2004).
11. Katsukata-Inafuku Keiko, *Okinawa joseigaku kotohajime* [Introduction to Okinawa Women’s Studies] (Shinjuku Shobo 2006).
12. Kawahashi Noriko, “Review Article: Religion, Gender and Okinawan Studies,” *Asian Folklore Studies* 59 (2000).
13. Katsukata-Inafuku (2006: 167).
14. See *Concerned Scholars of Okinawan Studies* (2001–2002: 5). Other criticisms of Sered include Monika Wacker, “Review of *Women of the Sacred Groves*” in *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 28, nos. 1–2 (2001), and Kawahashi Noriko, “Review Article: Religion, Gender and Okinawan Studies,” in *Asian Folklore Studies* 59 (2000).
15. The following observations overlap in part with Kawahashi (2000).

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# Chapter 7

## Women's Power to Give: Their Central Role in Northern Plains First Nations

JoAllyn Archambault and Alice Beck Kehoe

### Introduction

Among the two leading First Nations of the Northern Plains, North America, Blackfoot (Niitsitapi) and Lakota (Sioux), women are crucial to bringing blessing and power to their communities. In both nations, men go out fasting to gain some power to live, while women's innate reproductive capacity indicates they are born with greater power.<sup>1</sup> Women not only give their communities the next generation, and homes, but access to Almighty power via their central role in ceremonies.

For Blackfoot, women's reproductive capacity extends beyond childbearing to making the home, clothing, containers, and processing food. The legend of the First Marriages describes men as without ability to make any of these necessities, having nothing but their bows and arrows and flint knives. Women, in contrast, made fine lodges, clothing, and cuisine. Pitying the men, the women took them into their lodges as husbands. Traditionally, Blackfoot women owned their homes (*tipis*) and furnishings. Men lived with them on sufferance. The Blackfoot Sun Dance (*Okan*) is led by a priestess, the Holy Woman, and without such a woman willing to sacrifice her earnings and comfort to offer the *Okan* and carry out fasting and prayers, this most important of Blackfoot ceremonies cannot be performed. The *Okan* is technically the ritual of a medicine bundle (the *Natoas*). All major Blackfoot ceremonies are based in medicine bundles, and only women can open the bundles, hand

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Before her death, Dr. Beatrice Medicine prepared a paper on this topic for this volume. Unfortunately, she had not yet sent it to the editor, and it could not be found among her papers in her home. We have attempted to reflect our dear and esteemed colleague's views in this chapter and deeply regret that readers will not have her own presentation.

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out the holy objects inside, and rebundle them afterward. Therefore, Blackfoot men's access to traditional ritual performances is mediated by women, whose ability and willingness to act in this capacity are a gift to their communities.

For Lakota, holy pipes are links between humans and the Almighty. Knowledge of the pipe and principal ceremonies was brought to Lakota by the White Buffalo Calf Woman, who was actually a bison heifer. She gave both the pipe and ceremonies and the gift of her bison people to sustain the Lakota. Another legendary personage for Lakota is Double Woman, who can be dangerous to men but gives artistic power and visions of designs to women who approach her. These human women then can give objects of beauty to their families and communities.

From a woman's perspective, men's flamboyance in dancing and battle indicates not leadership but a lesser position. Women's roles command respect. Unfortunately, Western ethnographers did not, as a rule, realize the dependence of Northern Plains First Nations on women's gifts.

## **The Acknowledgment of Women and Their Gifts**

Both Blackfoot and Lakota recognize women's crucial role in enabling their communities to survive. Blackfoot, who speak an Algonkian language, have lived on the Northwestern Plains for many centuries, probably millennia. Lakota speak a Siouan language, quite unrelated to Algonkian, and are the Western components of an alliance with Dakota and Nakoda stretching from the upper Mississippi River through the Dakotas. Historically, both Blackfoot and Lakota depended on hunting bison, although Dakota in the Eastern Plains also raised maize and harvested wild rice. European contacts, initially with fur traders, began in the late seventeenth century. As European colonization pushed westward, so did Midwestern First Nations at the frontier, moving into territories already populated by other Indian nations. Complicating issues of territorial domains was the series of severe epidemics, particularly smallpox, decimating the Indian nations every generation from at least 1780 until final conquests and establishment of reservations a century later. The popular image of both Blackfoot and Lakota is of fierce warriors on horseback contesting the country against white homesteaders.

Confrontations and negotiations between men representing Anglo governments and First Nations men who were acknowledged as leaders have dominated ethnographies and histories. Anglo officials did not admit women to participate in treaty conclaves, nor give women official roles in the early reservations. Late nineteenth-century ethnographies conducted on the reservations are full of stories of men's war exploits. Women's activities are described as mundane matters and accounts of marital and extramarital relations given from men's point of view, without any balancing from women's point of view. These include, for example, gang rape by a husband and his comrades, or mutilation, to punish an adulterous wife. Our pictures of Northern Plains First Nations women are also skewed by ethnographers' inability to distinguish slave women – such as the famous Sakakawea who accompanied



Lewis and Clark's expedition, 1804–1806 – from both commoner and aristocratic women in First Nations communities.

The breakthrough in rectifying conventional skewed pictures of Plains Indian gender roles came in a session at the 1977 Plains Conference. Organized by Patricia Albers and Beatrice Medicine (herself Lakota), papers in the session were subsequently published under the title *The Hidden Half* (Albers and Medicine 1983). The papers emphasized that Northern Plains First Nations patterned gender roles into complementary spheres. Men were expected to go out hunting, to raid enemies for plunder, and to act as soldiers defending territory. Women owned the tipis, household furnishings, and domestic utensils. In addition, they manufactured tipis, clothing, and containers. They harvested plant foods and medicines and processed all food and hides, embroidered and decorated clothing and objects, and cared for children and for holy objects. This long list of what pertains to women, compared to the short list of men's responsibilities, correctly indicates women's central role in maintaining their communities. It was not uncommon for women to go out with hunting or war parties, although only a few women rejected domestic duties in favor of regular participation in war excursions (Medicine 1983). Blackfoot tell a legendary history succinctly revealing their understanding of the relative worth of men and women for communities:

The men and the women of the ancient Peigans [Blackfoot] did not live together in the beginning. The women ... made buffalo-corral. Their lodges were fine. Their clothes were cow-skins. Their moccasins were of the same. They tanned the buffalo-hides, those were their robes. They would cut the meat in slices. In summer they picked berries. They used them in winter. Their lodges all were fine inside. And their things were just as fine....

Now, the men ... were very poor. They made corrals. They had no lodges. They wore raw-hides and antelope-hides for robes.... They did not know, how they should make lodges. They did not know, how they should tan the buffalo-hides. They did not know, too, how they should cut dried meat, how they should sew their clothes. One useful thing of theirs were their bows and arrows. They had flint-knives.... After a long while their chief told them: Let us look for the women. (Uhlenbeck 1922: 167–70, reprinted in Eggermont-Molenaar 2005:326–27)

The story then describes how these pitiful men sat near the women's camp and the corral where they were butchering bison. The chief of the women decided that she and her band would each select a man for a husband and bring him into her lodge. She went up to the men's chief, the foolish and impulsive Napi (Dawn [–of-time] Man). He disdained her in her work dress. She went into her lodge, cleaned up, and put on her finest clothes. Now Napi wanted her. Haughtily, she chose another man, ignoring the eager Napi who valued fancy clothing over the work dress of an industrious woman.

It is clear from this legendary history that Blackfoot considered women to be entirely self-sufficient, able to corral bison for themselves as well as to prepare all the appurtenances of comfortable living. It is clear, too, that women give men the opportunity to live comfortably. In the community, women link with men in begetting and raising families, joining and participating in all-comrade societies, and tending holy pipes and other "medicine bundles" (such as the *Natoas*). In Blackfoot religious ceremonies, women give men opportunity to connect with spiritual power.

## Blackfoot Ceremonies

In common with many other American First Nations, Blackfoot kept holy relics wrapped up, hence the English term “medicine bundle” for what the Omaha ethnographer Francis La Flesche more aptly described as portable shrines (La Flesche 1930). A number of medicine bundles are considered to belong to the people as a nation; others, usually an object found or vouchsafed to the owner, belong to individuals. The major bundles, i.e., those that are part of Blackfoot patrimony, are cared for by couples who honor the spiritual beings represented in the bundle by giving substantial gifts to the previous caretakers when the bundle is transferred to their care. Transfer is done ritually, in a ceremony attended by other caretakers, persons needing spiritual favor to overcome a crisis such as a loved one’s illness, and those who wish to be blessed. A feast, prepared and served by the family and friends of the caretaker couple, begins with a thanksgiving prayer over bowls of berry soup, berries being quite literally fruits of the Almighty’s power and goodness. Ideally, heritage bundles are transferred every few years, in order for more families to share the presence of the holy beings in their homes. Yet because it is a weighty responsibility to maintain a bundle, and expensive to give suitable gifts and feasts to honor it, transfers are not so readily made.

A medicine bundle ceremony is preferably performed in a tipi, which may be erected for the occasion beside the caretaker couple’s home. At the back, in the place of honor in the tipi, sit the caretaker couple, the new couple if it is a transfer, and the singer who will lead the ceremony by singing the series of songs belonging to the several animals whose skins are preserved in the bundle. Men with rattles and drumsticks may sit beside the singer; drumming may be upon a sheet of rawhide placed on the ground before the men or on a traditional hand drum (not the Western big bass drums used in powwows). The bundle itself lies behind the singer, that is, at the far back place of honor in the tipi. The husband of the caretaker couple sits by the singer, the wife a bit behind him close to the bundle. It is she who reverently unwraps the bundle, takes up the objects in it one by one and hands them to the singer as the ceremony progresses, and takes them back and replaces them in the bundle as the song for each is completed. Some of the songs are accompanied by dancing that may mimic the actions of the animal that is being sung. A pipe of tobacco, lit from a fire in the center of the tipi, is passed around to everyone in the tipi, and those needing spiritual help may get up to dance around the fire holding the pipe as the singer prays. The singer (who is a man) and a woman, acknowledged to have spiritual leadership, bless everyone attending by painting their face with holy red ochre pigment – he painting the men and boys, she painting the women and girls.

Western ethnographers describing Blackfoot bundle ceremonies failed to see the woman’s crucial role. It was not until August 1971 that Kehoe attended a ceremony put on by a Euroamerican resident of the Montana Blackfeet Reservation, the late Bob Scriver (1914–1999), that she realized the woman sitting beside the bundle was not considered a server, but the intermediary between the holy power and the men.

Scriver, a well-known artist, had renounced Christianity and wanted to follow the religion of his Blackfoot neighbors. He claimed he had a vision instructing him to make a new tipi painted with images of badger. Since tipis painted with animal images are actually medicine bundles with ceremonies celebrating the favor given by that animal, Scriver had to inaugurate his tipi with a ceremony and feast. He had made a bundle with a pipe, rattle, badger skin, and a few other skins, announced a day for the ceremony, and invited several men to be singers. The tipi was set up, bundle at the back, singers and Scriver in front of it, fire lit in the center, and guests around the circle. Scriver opened his bundle and began handing out the objects in it to the lead singer. Something was making the men nervous. Finally, one of the guests said, "Bob, you can't be handing out those things. Mary [Mrs. Scriver] has to do it. Only women can handle those things." Mary came forward, sat by the bundle behind the singers, and all was well.

The Blackfoot *Okan*, or Sun Dance, requires a woman to vow to lead it. She must be a woman of good character, ready to undergo strenuous fasting and praying, for if she fails to perform the priestly role properly, the community may suffer ill consequences. In line with Blackfoot practices, the woman and her husband "buy" (i.e., give gifts for the transfer of) the *Natoas* medicine bundle from the previous year's Holy Woman. This medicine bundle contains the dress and headdress worn by the *Okan* Holy Woman. The dress is a plain elk skin traditional-cut dress said to have been given by Elk Woman, a female elk who demonstrated the power of a chaste woman over her unjustly jealous husband. The headdress incorporates icons of the Elk Woman story and other happenings associated with the ceremony. Another item in the *Natoas* is a digging stick said to have been used by the Woman Who Married Morning Star when she dug up a prairie turnip and became homesick for her people glimpsed through the hole in the sky. The medicine bundle thus manifests the power of several legendary heroines, carried before the community by a living woman of exemplary conduct. Such conduct is marked by her sacrifice of wealth, with her family and friends feasting the community, and of personal ease as she works hard to organize the 4-day, community-wide event and then by her continuous fasting and praying. All these activities awake the compassion of the Almighty and bring Its blessing upon her and all around her (Kehoe 1976; McClintock 1910:304–316; Wissler 1912:209–220).

No *Okan* can be held without a Holy Woman. She, like the women who unwrap other medicine bundles and hand their contents to the singers, is the medium through which blessings are channeled to men, other women, and children. She is not a passive medium but an active petitioner. The prosperity, health, and good fortune expected to ensue from a properly conducted *Okan* are the gift of the Holy Woman as well as the gift of the Almighty drawn to her by her prayer and sacrifice.

## Lakota Ceremony

The late Beatrice Medicine (1923–2005), a Sihasapa Lakota enrolled on Standing Rock Reservation, South Dakota, wrote several sensitive reflections drawn from her life as a Lakota woman and filtered through her professional training and

employment as an anthropologist (Medicine 1987, 2001). She stated that Lakota culture enshrines four great virtues: sharing and generosity, fortitude, wisdom, and bravery (Medicine 1987: 162; 2001: 96). For women today, she observed the ideals are evinced as hospitality and kindness, industriousness, wisdom, and strength to remain chaste before and faithful in marriage (Medicine 2001: 96). Medicine herself sensed Lakota society to be imbued with holiness (*wakan*), sanctifying not only ceremonies but everyday life. In this context it embodies respect for everyone, cherishing children, cheerfully providing food and clothing, and endeavoring to promote harmony (Medicine 2001: 194).

The principal Lakota ceremony was and is the Sun Dance. Because Lakota form one of the larger First Nations, a number of Sun Dances are performed each summer, held by various communities on the several Lakota reservations in North and South Dakota, Montana, Minnesota, and Manitoba (Archambault 2001). Among Lakota, unlike for Blackfoot, the central person leading the ceremony is a man, usually termed in English “the intercessor” to emphasize his role mediating between the people and the Almighty; in Lakota he is termed “holy man” (*wicasa wakan*). Among Lakota, customarily it is a man who vows to sponsor a Sun Dance, although his wife’s support and assistance is essential, as is that of the other women in his extended family (*tiospaye*). Women’s roles reflect their complementarity to men in daily life; women prepare food for feasts that will be offered at the Sun Dance camp and prepare the abundance of gifts that will be presented in a giveaway to those attending the dance. Today, thousands of dollars are spent purchasing most of the gifts, still organized usually by the women of the sponsoring family, with the most prized gifts such as star quilts handmade by the women. Families that include beadworkers and skilled craftswomen will donate hundreds of hours making items: housewares, tipis, blankets, traditional shirts and dresses, shawls, pillow cases, beaded moccasins, and dance regalia. All of these are to be given away to guests. It is not unusual for families to spend a year before the Sun Dance in making and acquiring articles for the giveaway and the daily feasts, most of which is the work of women. This is part of an informal economy that functions on all Northern Plains reservations and is directed and organized by women (Berman 2003). Cooking and organizing gifts are not background activities but clearly visible and acknowledged in the camp. The *wicasa wakan* who is sponsoring the Sun Dance has a number of male assistants and some experienced women who will be in the sweat lodges with the female dancers, able to provide support and advice to any who may need it. Both men and women vow to sacrifice and dance as a result of a personal vision, of a promise made in a time of need, or in search for religious assistance.

The most important female figure in Lakota oral traditions describing the origin of the Sun Dance is the White Buffalo Calf Woman, and the most common version told by modern Lakota is that narrated by Black Elk (Brown 1989: 3–9). Sometime a long ago, two young men were out hunting on the prairie when they saw a beautiful woman approaching. One of the men lusted for her; the other knew that he should respect women, even when one appeared thus alone and vulnerable. As the beautiful woman came up to them, the vile young man reached out to grab her and in an instant died and turned into a skeleton. The woman then told the good young

man that she was coming to their camp to give the people a blessing. He hurried ahead of her and when she arrived, his people were prepared to show her honor. She gave them the holy pipe and instructed them how to pray with it and how to live a good life caring for each other. Seven ceremonies, including the Sun Dance, were revealed in which the pipe was a critical ritual element. Then she took leave. The people watched her walk toward the horizon as she turned into a young buffalo calf, then a white buffalo, and finally a black buffalo that disappeared over the hill. This version is known and retold by most modern Lakota of each generation and is often depicted in contemporary prints, paintings, and even T-shirt designs and can also be found in many reservation homes. White Buffalo Calf Woman is often presented as a moral standard and example of the love and respect that should characterize the relations between men and women in modern life. Her virtue, generosity, industriousness, and hospitality make her the model for all Lakota women, and young women are urged to aspire to her virtues.

Black Elk's narration of the origin of the Sun Dance, however, also places it in a time long before the visit of the White Buffalo Calf Woman. He recounts that it resulted from a vision given to a man named Kablaya. The ritual is described in great detail with eight dancers each carrying an item that represents different elements of the Lakota universe. The eighth dancer is a female who represents White Buffalo Calf Woman and is responsible for the care of the pipe throughout the 4 days of the Sun Dance. Carrying the consecrated pipe, she leads the male dancers into the lodge and stays near the pipe for the remainder of the time. At the end of the day, she prays with the pipe, saying "O Grandfather Wakan Tanka help me! I do this that my people may live, and that they may increase in a sacred manner" (Brown 1989: 97).

There are other variants of this story, but all feature a woman who brings the gift of the pipe, the ritual knowledge, and the proper way of relating to one another. Sometimes she is identified as a Buffalo Woman (Walker 1917: 212–15) and at other times as Wohpe, the Beautiful Woman (Walker et al. 1980: 109–12).<sup>2</sup> The pipe is the most important element of prayer in Lakota religion and when properly used carries one's prayers to Wakan Tanka. While it is possible to pray without a pipe, it is more efficacious to pray with one, knowing that the smoke carries the prayer skyward in the same way that Wohpe disappeared in a cloud of sweet grass smoke at the end of her stay among the people (Walker 1980: 111).

The pipe that White Buffalo Calf Woman left behind has been treasured for many generations and is today kept in its medicine bundle by a Mnikowoju (Minneconjou) family on the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation in South Dakota. The pipe has descended through a series of keepers, both male and female, in the family of today's keeper, Arval Looking Horse, who received it from his grandmother, Lucy Looking Horse (Looking Horse 1987: 67).

Women and children have always been able to dance in the Sun Dance in the simplest form called Gaze at the Sun (Walker 1917: 61). They fasted and danced but were not attached to the sacred pole by ropes and hooks that pierced the skin. Many historical photos show one or more women following the male dancers in a Sun Dance lodge, although we have never seen a child pictured thus. In the 1970s when

JoAllyn Archambault began attending Sun Dances on the Pine Ridge and Rosebud reservations, she always saw female dancers and rarely children. The number of female dancers has continued to increase throughout the century, so that now the proportion of male to female dancers is usually equal and often there are more women than men in the lodge.

In Sun Dances sponsored by the American Indian Movement on the Pine Ridge reservation, women have begun to be pierced in the chest or back in the same manner as male dancers, in contrast to the earlier practice of women making flesh offerings from the upper arm (Walker 1917: 61; Holler 1995: 193). These women are tied by ropes to the sacred pole and break free by tearing the rope through their flesh, as do men. Some traditionalists who witnessed this development in the 1970s and 1980s were dismayed by what they saw as excessive and irreligious innovations by *wicasa wakan* who did not understand the sacred nature of Lakota women. Some remarked that women sacrificed their flesh by giving birth to the nation and there was no need for them to go beyond the traditional flesh offerings that has always been part of the Sun Dance. Others thought that the young women who were being pierced did not understand the inherent power and nature of Lakota women and were being influenced by non-Lakota notions about feminism and equal rights.

Sun Dances always vary in small details, one from the other, even when directed by the same *wicasa wakan* from year to year (Powers 1977: 62; Holler 1995: 194). The principal elements are always present, a circular dance arbor, central pole, buffalo skull, sacred altar, and sacred tipi, with an orientation to the four directions, and an opening to the east. The sequence of songs, ritual elements, and emphasis on certain elements, however, can all be changed from one dance to another. This stems from the process through which a man becomes a *wicasa wakan* by being an apprentice to an established sacred man, serving as his assistant and learning the ritual knowledge he will need once he completes the training. After a time, an apprentice becomes a *wicasa wakan* in his own right, conducts ceremonies, and may attract apprentices of his own. In order to maintain his relationship with the spirits and his own power, he must regularly pray alone and go on vision quests so as to renew his potency as a *wicasa wakan*. If he failed to do this, he would ultimately lose all of his powers (Powers 1977: 62–63). In the course of multiple vision quests, a sacred man could receive new spirit helpers and make changes in the way he conducted his rituals. This flexibility has resulted in all Lakota Sun Dances differing somewhat, even when directed by the same *wicasa wakan*.

This process of spiritual renewal and ritual change has resulted in the Sun Dances of some *wicasa wakan* having distinct characteristics that become hallmarks of their makers. One such characteristic is the passing of pipes among the gathered people by the Sicangu *wicasa wakan*, Leonard Crow Dog, of Rosebud Reservation. This passing of pipes to anyone wishing to smoke one has been much criticized by others who see in it lack of respect for the sacred pipe and the possibility of desecration by an evil person in the audience. The Oglala *wicasa wakan*, Arthur Amiotte, has also created new elements that emphasize the importance of women and the White Buffalo Calf Woman's gift of the pipe to the Lakota.



In preparation for the felling of the tree destined to become the center pole of the Sun Dance lodge, all the women present lay their blankets and shawls on the ground where the tree will land so no branches or leaves will touch the earth. The tree is prepared for the dance and its leaves are taken by women and kept by them as protection against evil influences. The act of women using their shawls and blankets to protect the tree can be understood as emblematic of the role of women in protecting children and caring for the Lakota people.

Women have always played important roles in the Sun Dance beyond cooking and gift preparation. The chopping of the cottonwood tree for the sacred center pole was one such role. In the late nineteenth century, it was adult women who had children and were noted for their hospitality and industry who were selected to chop down the tree (Walker 1917: 99). This gave them respect and honor by all those present and the right to paint a red stripe across their forehead. The Sun Dance pole is the most important focus for the dancers and audience and symbolizes both the tree of life and the *axis mundi* connecting the Earth and the above world (Amiotte 1987: 81). In more recent years, young girls who are virgin are chosen to be tree choppers. Girls are urged to live chastely so that they may be chosen for this holy action, and the families of the chosen proudly honor them by feasting the community. As part of their preparation, they are lectured about the proper behavior of Lakota women and how they should be exemplars of good behavior to others of their age. They are shown how to sit properly with their legs bent to one side and told how they should always strive to live the four virtues of the Lakota in their daily behavior, as were described earlier. Their importance as the mothers of future Lakota is emphasized, and they are told to teach these rites to their own children so they will never be forgotten. Their mothers or aunts stand beside them to comfort and encourage them. For some girls, the honor of being chosen as a tree chopper sets them on a path of right behavior and gives them social status within their own generation.

In the nineteenth century, virgins were given roles as assistants to dancers once they began to dance. Girls who wanted this role announced their virgin status publicly before the people, and any man had the right to say openly she was lying. There was a sequence of rituals if a woman was challenged, with severe implications for either man or woman who lied in this open forum. The names of the girls who passed the test were announced to the entire camp by the camp marshal, and a dance and feast took place. Only women could eat at the feast, but a dance followed in which the women picked a dance partner. Once the Sun Dance began, the next day the virgins appointed as assistants were allowed inside the lodge to encourage and assist the dancers by wiping blood from their wounds with sweet grass strands (Walker 1917: 99). In modern Sun Dances, only the tree choppers are required to be virgins. In addition to the virgin assistants, adult women who were related to the dancers could sit inside the lodge and encourage their relatives to be strong and brave and endure their suffering for the welfare of the *oyate* (Walker 1917: 99). The Sun Dance illustrates the importance of women's roles as complementary to that of men. While men protected and provided for the people, women sustained them through their fertility, their productivity, and their nurturing.



Part of the preparation of the sacred pole before it is lifted into the air is the tying of ritual objects to it, such as rawhide cutouts of a man and a buffalo, red cloth streamers, cherry branches (which represent the thunderbird's nest), and a bundle of items chosen by the *wicasa wakan*. The contents of Arthur Amiotte's sacred bundle include tools used by women as well as by men which are essential "for making life – the *wahinkte* (hide-tanning tool), the knife, a piece of *papa* (dried meat) with an arrow stuck through it, a woman's sewing awl, a tent stake for staking out a horse – all those things which mankind needs to construct and preserve life" (Amiotte 1987: 83). Tools used exclusively by women are the *wahinkte* and awl. Tools used by both men and women are the knife and the tent peg. The tipi is made by women, as is the dried meat, but men kill the buffalo which is then transformed by women into food and housing. All items speak to the necessity of both men and women in creating and sustaining life and the importance of each in this process. The complementarity of gender roles could not be more obvious.

Amiotte has emphasized the role of the White Buffalo Calf Woman and her gift of the pipe more than other *wicasa wakan*, and his apprentices have now carried it to other reservations. A virtuous woman is chosen to represent the sacred woman, and after all of the dancers and the *wicasa wakan* are assembled in the Sun Dance lodge, she enters from below the horizon. In a deliberate, slow manner, carrying the pipe in her hands, she comes into the lodge in a sunwise direction and hands the pipe to the *wicasa wakan*. She then stands behind the pipe stand and remains standing for all the dance sequences, resting only when the dancers rest. She is attended by several other virtuous women who may assist her if needed. It is a very arduous role and demands the same physical stamina as that of the dancers. She is a calm, quiet presence in the lodge, a visible reminder of the White Buffalo Calf Woman. At the conclusion of all the ceremonies and the end of the Sun Dance, the woman takes the pipe from the *wicasa wakan*, and with all looking on, she leaves the lodge and walks into the horizon, finally vanishing from sight. It is only at that point the *wicasa wakan* leads the dancers and other helpers out of the lodge, ending the Sun Dance, which is then followed by a feast and giveaway. It is a very dramatic conclusion to an intense and demanding role and brings praise and honor to the woman chosen to represent the sacred person by those present. It accentuates the contribution of the sacred woman and, by extension, that of all Lakota women to the survival and well-being of the *oyate*. There can be no mistake that women, together with men, are essential to the continuation of Lakota people.

There was another ceremony that was part of the Sun Dance in the nineteenth century but is no longer practiced today. On the third day, all of the adults were called to the council lodge from which they set out in a procession around the camp circle four times, the women leading and the men following after. The women sang and praised the Earth and the "feminine," while the men sang and praised the sky and the wind. At the end of the fourth circumlocution, the people dispersed to their homes (Walker 1917: 108). The participation of adult men and women, each praying to the different masculine and feminine elements of the Lakota sacred pantheon, reinforces the complementary roles of both genders and the fecund nature of female

power. Both need to respect and honor the other since both are necessary for life to exist and continue.

## Conclusion

For both Blackfoot and Lakota, women are the center and mainstay of the nation. Men defend it, a role that puts them on its outskirts and in contact with outsiders. Women are born with innate power to reproduce, not only children – the nation itself – but the appurtenances of civilized life, from comfortable homes and well-prepared food to proper care of icons vouchsafed to their communities by the Almighty. Northern Plains First Nations understand that we live through the compassion of the Almighty, a gift, and it is manifested in women's broad reproductive power. Women who carry out their domestic responsibilities and ritual roles are giving their communities life itself and the means, both physical and ceremonial, to maintain life.

## Notes

1. Anthropologist Ruth Underhill found a similar belief among Mohave. In an interview, she recalled that when she worked with Mohave men, she asked them why women did not sing the ceremonial songs that accompanied male activities and was told: "They [men] sing to gain power. Women already have it." While superficially subservient in their roles to men, women saw their ability to bear children as a balancing factor. They had powers that men would never have (Lavender and Parezo 2008: 353).
2. See Steinmetz for a list of other versions (Steinmetz 1998:110–14).

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## Chapter 8

# A Buddhist Gift Enigma: Exchange in Vessantara's Bodhisattvic Perfection of Giving

Suwanna Satha-Anand

### Giving in the Vessantara Jataka Tale

Giving, especially giving alms to the monks, constitutes a most basic virtue of generosity in Buddhism. This particular virtue is central to the sustenance of a structural relationship between the monks and the laity. The giving of food and lodging to the monks by the laity and the giving of *dhamma* (Buddhist teachings) to the laity by the monks are crucial to the health and prosperity of the Buddhist religion. However, the extreme giving of Prince Vessantara, a revered Bodhisattva (Buddha to be), in the *Vessantara Jataka Tale* (B.E. 2521, A.D. 1978), particularly the giving away of the auspicious elephant to Brahmins from a foreign land; the giving away of his children to Jujaka, a Brahmin beggar; and the giving away of his consort, Madsī, to Lord Indra in disguise, makes giving problematic as it involves great sufferings for his people and for those closest to him. The moral conflicts generated by Vessantara's great giving have been a perennial issue among Buddhist intellectuals for centuries. One of the most famous debates is the encounter between King Menander and Venerable Nagasena in the famous *Debate of King Milinda* (Pesala 1998).<sup>1</sup> King Milinda argues that, although the giving of Vessantara deserves praise, it has also brought about great sufferings for Madsī and the children. King Menander asks Nagasena about the merit of giving away the children, "But was it then a meritorious deed if the children were terrified and cried at being given away?" (Pesala 1998: 82). Nagasena answers, "Yes, it was. As a man desiring merit might take a cripple wherever he wanted to go in an ox-cart and thereby the oxen would be made to suffer; or as a king might levy a tax in order to perform a great meritorious deed; so too, giving, though it may cause anguish to some is conducive to rebirth in heaven" (Pesala 1998: 82). Nagasena uses these two examples as an analogy

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justifying Vessantara's great giving. He explains that Vessantara's great giving does accrue merit even if his wife and children have to face pain and sufferings. In addition, Nagasena reasons that Madsī herself has given her consent and, even if the children were older, they would have given their consent too. Moreover, at the end of the story, everything that was earlier given away was returned to Vessantara. The elephant, the children, the wife, and the kingship, all was returned to him. According to Nagasena, Vessantara knew that the Brahmin, Jujaka, would be unable to keep the children as slaves for long since he was advanced in years and that their grandfather would pay a ransom for their return. Ultimately speaking, the implication is that if someone needs to be blamed, one must blame Jujaka.

Nagasena's defense of Vessantara's great giving lays out the groundwork for future debates on this problematic. It raises the questions of means and ends in human action, the consent of those given, the poetic justice of the story, and the question of appropriate begging. All of these issues will continue in heated discussions throughout the Buddhist history.

In contemporary times, Buddhist scholars in Thailand and beyond are engaged in lively discussion of this moral conflict. We can outline a broad survey of key approaches in the following:

1. Works of scholarship that confirm the greatness of Vessantara's generosity, while bringing into focus issues of moral conflicts in the *Vessantara Jataka Tale*. Important examples of this approach are publications of Margaret Cone and Richard F. Gombrich (1997), Steven Collins (1998), and Phramaha Jooloum Chooleun (B.E. 2546).
2. Works of scholarship that offer criticisms of acts of giving by different Bodhisattvas including those of Vessantara. Important examples are works by Reiko Ohnuma (2000: 43–75) and Venerable Rassagala Seewali Thero (B.E. 2542).
3. Semi-academic works that defend the acts of giving by Vessantara on the grounds of political expediency. A key example is the work of Phra Pimoldhamma (Chob Anujareemahathera) (B.E. 2533).
4. Works of scholarship that criticize the acts of giving by Vessantara from the perspectives of human rights and women's rights. A key example is the work of Kornvipa Boonsue (1989).

This article will engage with these approaches while proposing to offer an analysis of the complex relationship between giving and exchange in *Vessantara Jataka Tale*. The analysis consists of two major topics, namely:

- Giving as an act of status confirmation and of extreme giving by a Bodhisattva
- Bodhisattva giving and an economy of exchange

## Giving as an Act of Confirming Status and of Extreme Giving by a Bodhisattva

It is interesting to note that the basis of the general discussion of the moral conflicts involved in Vessantara's great giving does not start from a crucial distinction between two different types of giving in the *Vessantara Jataka Tale*. They are, first, giving which confirms the status of a prince or "appropriate" giving and, second, extreme giving by a Bodhisattva which disrupts or transgresses the boundary of appropriate giving. Most of the criticisms or defenses of Vessantara's generosity are based on a lumping together of these two types of giving. Yet it is obvious in the story that it is only the extreme acts of giving away the elephant, the children, and the wife which cause moral conflicts for the kingdom as well as for the royal family. This article proposes a different approach by basing our discussion on a distinction of these two types of giving. It will be argued that the first type of "appropriate giving" practically excludes any possibility of reciprocity by the people to repay the prince or to change their own socioeconomic status. In contrast, the second type of extreme giving disrupts the very social order protected by the first type of giving. This second type of acts of extreme giving would require two levels of analysis. With the first level, the conceptual framework is limited to the temporal frame of the story, while the conceptual framework of the second level of analysis goes beyond the temporal frame of the story itself.

Not all of the great acts of extreme giving of Vessantara give rise to social and moral chaos. Vessantara's heart yearns to give from moments after his birth. The recipients of Vessantara's lavish gifts since childhood have been the court ladies, the court officials, as well as the people of his kingdom, Sipi. Before the giving of the elephant, all acts of giving by Vessantara have given rise to the praise and glory of the young prince. Vessantara's princely generosity only confirms his royal status as a prince in the kingdom of Sipi.

This great generosity of Vessantara was a result of a prayer of his mother, Queen Pusati, who had made a wish, "Let me have a son whose glory is greater than those of other kings. Let his heart lie in the faith of increasing merit for all the peoples in the kingdom" (*Vessantara Jataka Tale*, B.E. 2521: 12). Early on in the *Vessantara Jataka Tale*, when Vessantara performs the *Great Giving of the Magnificent Gifts of 700*, for example, 700 elephants, 700 horses, 700 carriages, and 700 male slaves, there was not a single moment of discomfort or protest or criticism from anyone in the story. On the contrary, one could argue that the Great Giving of the Magnificent Gifts of 700 illustrates the magnitude of giving which confirms his princely status. The nature and number of the gifts all indicate that only a prince can bestow these magnificent gifts to the people, all from his own generosity, without anyone asking. The magnificent gifts are signs of the magnificent status of Vessantara as a prince.

Before the giving of the auspicious elephant, all acts of giving by Vessantara have been given without any request. This type of giving transforms the status of the people as recipients of gifts. Such an act of receiving gifts indicates an acceptance of some form of favour from the giver. When the giver is a prince, it further implies

a sense of “submission” *of* the people *to* the prince. This gift receiving could also lead to a sense of obligation, of being indebted to the prince. The gift giving and gift receiving generate a mode of relationship, a process that projects into the future when the indebted people could “repay” the prince with their loyalty, labour, and property or even their life. In the Jataka tale, two types of recipients are mentioned: first, those who sing glory and praise and, second, those who lament. Those who lament contemplate their future in the following way, “Woe to us! We will only be deprived. The Lord Prince will be taken away from us” (B.E. 2521: 61). It seems that both groups of people share a common perception that “Oh, our crystal sun will be gone! We the poor will continue to be deprived” (B.E. 2521: 61).

This metaphor of the prince as the sun indicates an image of someone whose abundance overflows from its source reaching out to everyone. The scale of abundance makes the giver “always a giver, never receiving anything from anyone.”<sup>2</sup> In this Jataka tale, Vessantara is compared to a “crystal sun” who gives light and gifts which overflow everywhere to everyone in the realm. This comparison indicates that the Great Giving of the Magnificent Gifts of 700 is generosity of the “Lord of the people,” who becomes a “giver” for everyone. After this, the people become “indebted” to Vessantara, at least with their feelings of obligation or loyalty. It is important to note that all the gifts are lavish and magnificent. They include 700 elephants, 700 horses, 700 carriages, 700 court ladies, 700 milk cows, 700 male slaves, and 700 female slaves (B.E. 2521: 59–60). These gifts, however, are not viewed as something that could become a source of new capital for possible transformation of the people’s livelihood, i.e., an elevation from a life of poverty and deprivation, to a more economically secure or independent life. The people lament that, after this great giving of the magnificent gifts of 700, “We the poor will continue to be deprived. We will receive these things only for today” (B.E. 2521: 61).

From this speculation by the poor people, we can deduce that the poor people who receive the gifts do not see the possibility of any changes in their economic or social status as a result of receiving these gifts. They see themselves as being just as deprived as before and will only wait to receive more gifts in the future. Part of their sorrow lies then in their not seeing the possibility of receiving again, but not in the lack of possibility of their own economic or social change. They bewail their lack of opportunity to receive gifts from Vessantara in the future, and they also feel sorrowful for not being a recipient again, but their sadness does not lie in the lack of opportunity for economic or social change for themselves.

One theorist of ethics of generosity suggests that there are two moments of giving: one is a stabilizing moment and the second is a dangerous and transgressive moment (Schrift 1997: 282). In our discussion of Vessantara’s great giving, we can say that all acts of giving before the giving of the auspicious elephant, including the giving of the Magnificent Gifts of 700, indicate the first moment of giving as a stabilizing factor. Vessantara at these moments is acting within the tradition of a generous prince. His giving enhances rather than threatens his status as a prince. Given our analysis of the lamenting of the people, we can safely say that his great giving does not in any way affect the existing social and economic structure. On the contrary, his acts of giving illustrate how Vessantara could be a prince of greater glory



than other princes. His great status as prince is confirmed through his acts of giving, not his acts of showing how much he has. The people of the kingdom of Vessantara are not only the spectators of the prince's grandeur but also recipients of much of his wealth.

Although we are arguing that the people of Vessantara's kingdom are spectators of the prince's grandeur, we are not denying, however, that a spectacle of wealth is not also on display for the people. A detailed description of the magnificence of each of the great gifts certainly depicts a vivid picture of the great wealth of Vessantara. Take the example of the description of the 700 carriages, "All royal carriages are covered with golden adornment as magnificent as a bejeweled royal throne. They are drawn with two horses with an awesome carriage master holding bow and arrows" (B.E. 2521: 60).<sup>3</sup> These detailed descriptions are amply supplied in the original Thai version, and they serve the purpose of depicting the grandeur of the owner of these gifts in the eyes of the people of Sipi, as well as in the hearts and minds of the listeners to the tale. The people of Sipi, as well as the audience of the recitation of this tale, are transformed into spectators as well as recipients.

On the other hand, the second moment of giving indicates a dangerous transgression. It starts with the giving away of the auspicious elephant and the giving away of Vessantara's children and wife. These acts of extreme giving subvert the very social order protected and maintained by the first type of giving. These acts of extreme giving bring about danger to the royal family, a threat from the people, and an impending disintegration of the whole political order of Sipi.

## Bodhisattva Giving and Economy of Exchange

Buddhist scholars have been puzzled by the description of Vessantara's birth. The "place" of Vessantara's birth is in the middle of "merchants' roads," instead of in the royal palace. It has been described as simply a "silly episode" (Cone and Gombrich 1997: xxi). A major Buddhist scholar concludes, "But we rather think that the name had no significance" (Cone and Gombrich, xxxiii). But the text is rather specific in indicating the place of Vessantara's birth. It runs: "In the middle of the roads frequented by merchants, during a sudden gasp of wind, the queen was in labor pain. Surrounded by royal relatives, the queen gave birth to a baby prince there" (B.E. 2521: 17).

Given the major theme of this Jataka tale as a story of the perfection of generosity of a Bodhisattva who, in his next life, will be reborn as Prince Siddhattha, I would like to propose a different reading of this birth episode. The rather deliberate placing of Vessantara's birth in the middle of roads frequented by merchants and traders suggests to me a placing of "giving" in the middle of trading relationships of exchange. This is because charity and generosity are virtues that seem to resist, transgress, or violate the economy of exchange. People who fundamentally operate in the middle of exchange relationships are the merchants and traders. The birth of

Vessantara, as a Bodhisattva, a supreme giver, is placed in the middle of an economy of exchange.

Scholars have made a distinction between a “gift economy” and a “logic of exchange.” The former is based on a denial of economic practice, rejecting (or resisting) the logic of making the most profit in various forms of transaction. A gift economy purports to accumulate “symbolic capital,” which could be recognition or honour – qualities of a noble man. Virtues which resist the logic of exchange would cultivate altruistic qualities which could lead to great sacrifices, even the sacrifice of one’s life for greater ideal, bypassing one’s own immediate profits (Schrift 1997: 234–35). If we read the *Vessantara Jataka Tale* as a Buddhist story that spells out the conflicts between two sets of logic, namely, between the economy of giving and the logic of exchange, we would appreciate the great significance of the name of Vessantara, as someone born in the middle of the “roads of the merchants.”

In this analysis of Vessantara’s economy of giving, a distinction needs to be made between two types of “exchange” as laid out in the Jataka tale:

1. The exchange for profit by Vessantara with Jujaka and the village Brahmins; worldly exchange between Amittada’s parents and Jujaka and that between village Brahmins and their wives;
2. A “perfection” of giving in the “exchange” for future enlightenment of Vessantara, i.e., Vessantara’s “exchange” for future enlightenment in a Bodhisattvic perfection of giving.

When the Thai audience read or listen to *Vessantara Jataka Tale* with Vessantara, the great Bodhisattva as the centre, they generally feel the greatness of the perfection of his generosity as a Bodhisattva. However, if the focus in the reading or listening is on the social environment or the background of the story, what becomes obvious is the subtle yet ubiquitous placing of Vessantara’s great acts of giving in the midst of the fierce and pervasive relationships of exchange.

While the first four chapters of the Jataka tale, namely, *Tossporn (Ten Blessings)*, *Himapan (Himapan Forest)*, *Tannakan (On Giving)*, and *Vanapraves (Touring the Forest)*, outlining the story of Vessantara from birth until the expulsion from Sipi to the forest, portray Vessantara’s determined devotion to perfect his generosity, the chapter on Jujaka begins with a totally different life form. The life of the Brahmin by the name of Jujaka is totally entangled with begging, debts, and money transactions. Jujaka is described as a “wretched poor man without kin, wanders around begging among those with blemish, can be compared to a wandering outcaste” (B.E. 2521: 105). Jujaka, having saved about 100 kasapanas, begins to feel unsafe carrying around that much money. He decides to put it in the trust of his friends, the parents of Amittada, before he continues his begging journey. The narrative on Jujaka in the Jataka is not one of sympathy for an old, poor man, without relatives, who has to beg to save every penny for the security of the last years of his life, but is one of a severe criticism of his “greed.” The description runs, “A greedy old man whose aims for gains know no limits. He makes journeys to different lands, big and small, to beg with a greedy desire for gains” (B.E. 2521: 106).

The narrative then switches to the life of Amittada's parents who, having had Jujaka's money in their trust for several years, begin to think, "This money has been in our hands (for so long). Why do we just sit around doing nothing? Why be the poor ghost watching over money? No, no. When the old man comes back, we will think up something to repay him. They start spending the money, giving some away, putting other into buying and selling" (B.E. 2521: 106–7). While Jujaka is depicted as being greedy, the parents of Amittada are described as "light at heart." They think only of gain, squandering Jujaka's money in various things and then losing it all. Finally, when Jujaka does come back, they have no money left, only their daughter, Amittada. They bequeath their only daughter to Jujaka in repayment for their debt owed to Jujaka. This "exchange" is based on a calculation of comparable if not equivalent payment between the debt and the daughter. Amittada's parents claim that the value of their daughter as repayment outvalues the debt they owe Jujaka. In their eyes, Jujaka makes a profit as their daughter is worth more than the money. Amittada's parents reason with Jujaka, "Grandpa, Grandpa, why so much trouble? When you have the money, why worry not having things? When you have gold, why worry not having a ring? We will repay you. It is clear that our thing is worth more than what we owe you, but we will overlook this. We will disregard the excess, so that we can still be friends in the future" (B.E. 2521: 108).<sup>4</sup>

At this moment of repayment, Amittada's parents are calculating the "worth" of their daughter as higher than that of their debt of 100 kasapanas to Jujaka. They are saying that they "disregard" that excessive amount, but, in the act of saying it, they are reminding Jujaka of the new "debt" that now it is Jujaka who is owing them. But in disregarding this new "debt," they are using it as a basis of a continued "friendship" between them and Jujaka. The postponement of time and the delay in paying back the debt both indicate that this exchange does not end then and there. This delaying tactic is one way of keeping a friendly relationship longer than a raw or direct relationship of exchange or concrete repayment of old debt and their daughter. The statement of Amittada's parents has transformed their debt to Jujaka into a new form of "favour," so that it is now Jujaka who owes them. And yet, in all likelihood, Amittada's parents are also well aware that they might need to depend on Jujaka again in the future. At this moment, the narrator's voice provides the audience with a lesson. "The two old parents bequeath their beloved daughter to the old Brahmin. This is because the parents are no good, often accumulating debts, orchestrating their vice for the world to see. The children have to face the dire consequences due to the carelessness of the old parents" (B.E. 2521: 109).

Jujaka himself reacts to the words of Amittada's parents with great excitement. The former image of an old greedy Brahmin is now transformed into an old "ox" full of lust. The narrative continues, "Seeing young and girlish Amittada, the old man's heart is throbbing with lust, like an old ox, seeing soft, delicious, young grass becomes so excited with pointed ears and tail" (B.E. 2521: 43). (This same lust in old Jujaka is invoked again later as the reason why Jujaka agrees to leave the village to ask for Vessantara's children upon the demand of an angry Amittada. Amittada threatens to leave Jujaka if he does not go beg for children of Vessantara to be her servants. Amittada herself makes this demand after being reviled by other Brahmin

wives whose husbands berated them for not being so young, beautiful, and dutiful as Amittada. This fear of losing Amittada is the motivation that pushes Jujaka out of his village into a journey that finally leads to the end of his life.)

The reaction of Amittada to her being given to Jujaka initially reflects the image of an obedient daughter who submits to the transactions between her parents and Jujaka. In the royal version of this tale, there are no scenes of any protest or resistance from Amittada. The tale says only, “Amittada is a dutiful daughter of the family, neither thinks of herself as a slave, nor that she is a young woman having an old husband. She only thinks that her parents’ sufferings are her own. Their karma is her karma” (B.E. 2521: 110).<sup>5</sup> It is obvious that even here within the family, as in other spheres of life like religion, arts, and honour, where the relationships should be one without interference from monetary transactions, the logic of exchange is nonetheless pervasive and powerful. The daughter in this Brahmin family is being “calculated” for her worth in repaying the debt of the parents. The daughter’s sense of dutiful submission supports and concludes this transaction within the logic of exchange.

This logic of exchange is operative not only in this “friendly” relationship between Jujaka and Amittada’s parents but is extremely explicit in the relationships between the village Brahmins and their wives. When the Brahmin men in the village “see” young and beautiful Amittada pampering old and ugly Jujaka in every way she can, they begin to compare her with their own wives. The result is envious rage. The story describes the situation: “Some are frustrated and resentful, others pace around and curse, all of them fuming, heading home” (B.E. 2521: 110). At home, the Brahmins begin to be violent, both physically and verbally, toward their wives. In their minds, they start to think of how they had acquired their wives. Their thoughts circle around monetary exchange and benefits. They quarrel fiercely with their wives:

Before I could get you as wife, I had to put in money, and dowry. I prepared the dowry bowl, the house. Is it right for you to be so ungrateful and without fear? You have no idea how to take care of a husband. Are you not ashamed? I will take your hand and sell you in order to shame you. Let the buyer put you to hard labor. Only then I will redeem you back. Only then you could feel some guilt. The more I think, the more I want to get rid of you. I will find another wife who is more beautiful than the rest. Someone who is like young Amittada the wife of that old bearded. (B.E. 2521: 111–12)

Envy of sexual services and caring devotion that Jujaka daily receives from young Amittada reminds the Brahmins in village of the “investment” that they have “lost” when they acquired their wife. In comparison to Amittada, the Brahmins *start* to see that their own wife “has no idea how to take care of a husband.” Although before the arrival of Amittada, they did not seem to “see” the relationship with their wife this way. They bring up the “money,” the “dowry,” and the “dowry bowl” that they had “lost” before acquiring their own wife. This highlights the aspect of “loss” and “gain” in the family relationship. In a sense the Brahmins feel that it is “unjust” that Jujaka has acquired such a young and beautiful wife, i.e., that Jujaka does not “deserve” such a young and beautiful girl.

They resent that the old Jujaka as a husband receives such caring devotion from Amittada, much more service than what they get from their wives. In the last two sentences of this section of the tale, the young village Brahmins imagine that they will “find another wife who is more beautiful than the rest. Someone who is like young Amittada, the wife of that old bearded.” These two sentences of comparison, of finding someone “more” beautiful than the rest and “as beautiful as” Amittada, reflect a sense of envy and an imagined way to redress the unjust situation. Only when they find someone “comparable” with Amittada, whose arrival has set new standards for their family, will their rage be appeased. This supposed logic of equivalence leads to a comparison and envy, which results from their perception of a disproportionate injustice occurring.<sup>6</sup> Envy is an emotion that is related to the question, “Who should get what and how much is appropriate?” Envy develops when someone “sees” better or more beautiful things are acquired by someone of comparable status or position at a time when one thinks that oneself deserves those but still does not have them. Envy is an emotion of comparison, of weighing equivalence. It is an emotion based on calculations of greater or smaller benefits when comparing with someone who is the object of envy. Before the arrival of Amittada, these village Brahmins may have compared their wives with the wives of other Brahmins whose “differences” might not be so noticeable. Envy did not occur then. After the arrival of Amittada, the scale of comparison was changed.

The image of greed described in the *Vessantara Jataka Tale* is focused principally on Jujaka. But greed and desire for gain are also basic and central to the lives of members of a society that is propelled by modes of exchange. The logic of exchange has pervaded and controlled all modes of human relationships, including friendship and the family. The parents of Amittada, the whole wretched life of Jujaka, and the families of Brahmins in the village, each and every one of them is calculating his/her loss and gain, fighting and struggling to get the “better” of the deal, by gaining more and losing less. This background scenario of the economy of exchange walks hand in hand with lust, anger, rage, envy, and greed. This whole world of exchange is going to be radically challenged by the determined vow of perfection of generosity of Vessantara.

The next section raises the question in what way the perfection of generosity of Vessantara himself as a form of “gift economy” transgresses, resists, or subverts the logic of exchange so pervasive in this story. From another perspective, one may also ask whether the perfection of generosity of Vessantara is itself a form of “higher” exchange, namely, an exchange undertaken with a view to a future enlightenment.

## A Bodhisattva Giving “in Exchange for” Enlightenment

The world of men is full of speculation for gain, competition for benefits, and struggling for best deals in the sea of exchange. This world is reflected in the life of Jujaka whose life is spent on begging and calculating gains and, finally, ends in gluttony. The contrasting image of Vessantara, a Bodhisattva with a determination

to “perfect” his generosity, is illustrated at the very first moment of his birth. The baby prince’s first words to his mother are: “My dear mother, whatever wealth that we have, I will give away” (B.E. 2521: 18). At the age of eight, Vessantara first mentions his wish to give anything, including his own life, “in exchange for” ultimate enlightenment (B.E. 2521: 19). When Vessantara gives away the auspicious elephant to the Brahmins from a foreign land, after being informed that the people of Sipi had been enraged by his generosity, he says, “The elephant that I gave is a minor gift. A more superior giving is giving my own body or life. If there should be a beggar asking for my limbs and eyes, I will take them out and give away. This is in exchange for enlightenment in the future. This punishment of expulsion is a minor punishment, even if a death sentence is passed, I will not waver from my determination to perfect my generosity” (B.E. 2521: 33–34).

At one level, giving as status confirmation has not posed any challenge to the system of exchange of profits and benefits in society. As a Bodhisattva, however, whose determination is to perfect his generosity, especially the giving away of the elephant and his children and wife, Vessantara has caused great calamity and chaos in Sipi, as well as in the life of his whole family. As a result, he has to face the punishment of expulsion. On the one hand, his perfection of generosity is a prerequisite for anyone aspiring to become a Buddha. It is a form of testing the ego or self of a person. However, this perfection of generosity of a Bodhisattva is not without self-awareness that the Bodhisattva is performing an act of exchange. In this connection, Vessantara himself makes several explicit confessions. The following are two main examples.

After giving Chalie, his son, to Jujaka, Vessantara offers his explanation to his son who is hiding in the lotus pond:

Please come up and be my golden ship, skillfully crafted by the craftsman. When a small storm comes, the ship sails along, being seen by all sentient beings. When a big storm comes, no matter how deep is the greed, with huge waves attacking the ship, the ship is unaffected. It sails along until it reaches a crystal city, that is, ultimate enlightenment. My son, why stay so long in the pond. Please come up and help me perform this great son giving, only this once. (B.E. 2521: 217–18)

When Vessantara gives away his wife, he again confirms his determination:

Oh Brahmin, our royal consort is as dear to me as my own heart and eyes, but I love enlightenment more, a hundred thousand times more than my love for my wife. This perfection of wife giving, once accomplished, will lead to future enlightenment. (B.E. 2521: 275)

In one way, giving is a “true giving” only when both the giver and the receiver do not see the act as giving or receiving. This is because a true giving must be an act without any consideration of “consequential exchange.” It could not expect a sense of indebtedness or a continuing friendly relationship or any consequences that could befall both the giver and the receiver (Schrift 1997: 234). However, such a definition of “true giving” seems to construct a definition from a framework external to the agency of the giver, negating the meaning or intention of the giver whose intention is “to give.”<sup>7</sup> In our discussion of Vessantara’s giving, it is clear that he was asking his son to be his “golden ship” which will be a vehicle leading him to the great land

of Nirvana. In the case of Madsī, he confesses that he “loves” enlightenment “a hundred thousand times” more than he loves her. He is asking one love to become a “sacrifice” for his own greater love of future enlightenment.

From this perspective, it could be argued that Vessantara is not “giving” anything because he explicitly says that his acts of giving away the auspicious elephant, his wife, and children are a giving which is a kind of “exchange” for future enlightenment. This delaying of time into the future, waiting for another time and place when and where the consequence of this giving will bear fruit, indicates that these acts of giving are actually a form of calculated, delayed exchange. It can thus be viewed as a form of exchange that goes beyond the quantitatively fixed mode of direct exchange in commercial transactions. For example, once the quantitatively fixed amount of a purchase of merchandise or service of 1000 baht is paid, the exchange relationship is complete. In other spheres of human relationship, such as that between parents and children, the filial piety felt by the children is not expected to be proportionate to the amount of money and investment that the parents put into the raising of the children. In intimate and personal relationship, the “exactness” and “immediacy” of exchange needs to be delayed and “unquantified.” The delay and “de-quantification” of exchange gives freedom and latitude to “reciprocity.” The giving of gifts, and not only of money, gives rise to a distinction between impersonal commercial exchange and a personal relationship, which includes a mode of reciprocity. If a sex service buyer wants to change the relationship of exchange from paying his “fee” to giving “gifts” to the sex service provider, he is expressing his intention to *keep* and *prolong* the relationship. The exchange relationship becomes personal.<sup>8</sup> Given these considerations, can it be asked whether the great giving of Vessantara, ultimately speaking, indicates a mode of prolonged relationship of exchange? The question becomes, “Does Vessantara’s intention to give *in order to* achieve enlightenment in the future constitute *a form of exchange or simply a perfection of generosity?*”

This question cannot be answered in an “either/or” formula. I would like to propose that a discussion of the moral responsibility of Vessantara depends on the temporal framework of the analysis itself. If the temporal framework of the analysis is limited to the story itself, the act of giving away his family can be seen as a form of exchange, as explicitly stated several times by Vessantara himself. However, if the temporal framework of the analysis extends beyond the story, covering the future life of Vessantara as Prince Siddhattha who ultimately attains enlightenment, it then appears that his acts of giving away his family are part of a process of “secondary actions.” This process needs to be fulfilled in order to achieve the ultimate end of enlightenment. Even if the giving away could be seen as “selfish” within the framework of the story, the enlightenment of the Buddha has benefited endless streams of beings who have been helped in working out their liberation from the cycles of sufferings. The ultimate aim of enlightenment is a set of “constitutive rules” which define the acts of giving of Vessantara, not as a form of exchange, but as actions necessary for future purpose.

In this latter framework, Vessantara’s giving is no longer part of the logic of exchange, as Vessantara was not “gaining” anything for himself anymore. Instead,



the great benefits of the Buddha's enlightenment for all sentient beings form another set of "constitutive rules" which offer a different "reading" of Vessantara's acts of giving. From this temporal framework, which lies beyond the story itself, it can be claimed that the "primary action" of attaining enlightenment "re-describes" the acts of Vessantara's great giving as "secondary actions" which need to be accomplished by a long chain of events. A distinction between a "worldly" exchange and a "Bodhisattvic" career of giving that is ordered toward a future purpose needs to be made.

## Concluding Discussion

This article illustrates the complexity of the discussion of the moral responsibility of Vessantara's great giving. It offers a distinction between giving as status confirmation and giving as status transgression, so as to provide a tool of analysis that helps to explain Vessantara's generosity. It lays out the "background" of the story, which portrays a picture of pervasive "logic of exchange" in the lives of Amittada's parents, Jujaka, the village Brahmins, and their wives. Vessantara's acts of giving away his wife and children need to be read against the background of these forms of "thick" exchange. The final discussion centres on at least two possible options of reading Vessantara's own perfection of generosity. The first views it as simply another form of exchange, while the other views it as a secondary action, needing to be achieved in order to accomplish the primary action of attaining future enlightenment.

This discussion addresses the complex temporal frameworks of the Jataka tale itself. At the beginning, the "present time" of the story is the Buddha delivering a sermon on his own past life as Vessantara. This features the very life of his "future" enlightenment because of his pledge made in his former life as Vessantara. At the very end of the Jataka tale, a short section is devoted to the identification of the various characters in the story as the people in the life of the Buddha. From the perspective of the audience, when they hear the story as told by the Buddha, they would already have in mind the "future" of the Jataka tale, accomplished in the very life of the Buddha as the narrator of this story. The traditional audience throughout Thai history would also have their "present" as the "future" fulfillment of the tale.<sup>9</sup> All these temporal considerations would have been the "pre-understanding" of all who hear or read the story within the Buddhist tradition. In this sense, the question whether, within the time frame of the story, Vessantara's perfection of generosity is a form of exchange would not have readily come up. Nevertheless, this question needs to be addressed in order to demonstrate a crucial distinction between self-based, benefit calculation modes of "worldly" exchange and other-based modes of benefit consideration undertaken in Vessantara's "Bodhisattvic" career of giving.

Last but not least, an often-overlooked aspect of the whole story is the fact that two women are at the centre of the acts of "giving." First, Amittada, the village girl, was given away as repayment of her parents' debts. This situation is endlessly

repeated in the lives of many sex workers in the long and complex history of prostitution in Thailand. It is important to note that the “readiness” of the parents to “give” their daughters as repayment of debts, and the seeming “willingness” of the daughters to see the transaction as a form of showing their gratitude toward their parents, could be seen as related to this cultural resource. The commonly accepted story of Amittada in the life of the village could itself be a cultural source of a worldview which helps provide the “push” factor for many Thai women who work in the sex trade.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, Madsī, the royal consort, experienced a different path of being given away as part of the Bodhisattvic career of her husband/prince. In the Thai Buddhist tradition, Madsī has been considered a “queen of a Bodhisattva,” but this author has elsewhere raised a critical question as to why Madsī herself is not seen or understood to be a female Bodhisattva (see Satha-Anand 1996). It could be argued that Madsī, in explicitly expressing her graceful support for Vessantara’s giving of his wife and children, is also actually fulfilling the ultimate condition of Vessantara’s great generosity. This expressed consent and support help make Vessantara’s generosity “perfect.” This very “perfect” generosity helps Vessantara proceed with his ardent wish for future enlightenment. At both above levels, women in Thai society have been subject to a process of cultural formation and recognition of their roles, either as part of an exchange in a debt situation or as a token of generosity offered by a future Buddha. Viewed in this way, a critical question could be raised: In what way has Buddhism as a factor in cultural construction helped form the identity of women in Thai society? In this sense, a gendered reading of the tale of Prince Vessantara would offer critical and controversial dimensions to this most popular *Jataka* tale in Thai history. From this perspective, women’s own agency in the whole complex web of exchange and giving could be more carefully studied and more strongly emphasized.

## Notes

1. In some parts I will summarize the debate on the merit of Vessantara’s extreme giving in my own words for the sake of brevity.
2. This metaphor is used in Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as quoted in Schrift (1997: 276).
3. My English translation from the Thai text is not a complete translation. I translated the sense of this passage rather than the full sentences.
4. Please see an article which relates the fates of many Thai sex workers with that of Amittada in this *Jataka* tale in Keyes (1984: 213–41).
5. It is interesting to note that the depiction of Amittada in some Northern Thai version shows signs of resistance and protest. This is due probably to the necessity to create “emotional credibility” with the Northern audience as the women in their cultural world seem to enjoy more power in the domestic sphere.
6. Please see a collection of good essays on the relationship between jealousy, envy, and sense of justice in Epstein (2003).

7. Please see an analysis of the centrality of the intention of the actor in defining the meanings of human action and his/her responsibility in Ricoeur (1990).
8. Please see a discussion of the way money “defines” modes of relationship in Simmel (1990), particularly Chap. 5.
9. The meanings and significance of this Jataka tale are, of course, multiple and varied. Please see a study of the different degrees of popularity of the tale in Bangkok period in Thai history in Jory (1996).
10. Please see a direct indication of the life of Amittada as reflecting the lives of many sex workers in Thailand in Keyes (1984). Please also see a more detailed discussion of the meanings of this Jataka tale for the lives of Thai women in Satha-Anand (1999: 193–211).

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## Chapter 9

# Food Gifts (Female Gift Givers): A Taste of Jewishness

Norma Baumel Joseph

On the holiday of Purim,<sup>1</sup> Jews customarily give gifts of food to their neighbors. Small packages of sweet pastries, fruit, candy, and grape juice fill the kitchen table. Mama prepares and assembles the goodies; Papa and kiddies deliver the gifts. This conventional scene, found in many Jewish homes, is the one I wish to examine.

Aside from the ancient Temple sacrifices and tithing practices, there are few other examples of directed food giving in Judaism, a religion known for its food praxis. In the traditional Jewish community, after a death in the family, neighbors, female neighbors, are known to prepare meals during the *shiva* (mourning) period. This act of food preparation and giving is considered one of great charity or kindness known as *hesed*. But for the most part, food for human consumption has not been perceived as a gift in Judaic lore and tradition. Moreover, a woman's role in the kitchen, though significant, has not been seen as critical religiously. She is charged with maintaining the family's *kashrut* practice<sup>2</sup> but not awarded with its resulting piety. Her sacred role and productive power are lost in the observers' gaze.

This paper will shift the ethnographic focus to the kitchen and to women as the ritual experts in that location. Beginning with an examination of the Purim traditions, it will interrogate the possibility that the preparation of meals can be perceived as her distinctive gift, perhaps her sacrificial offering or tribute, to family and community. Worship of God in the Temple, liturgically known as *avodah* (servitude), used food as the mechanism of expression. Food was brought as a sacrifice – an offering – to God. Most often it was perceived to represent the individual but frequently it represented the family. When the Temple was destroyed, some claimed that the kitchen table replaced the sacrificial altar. Can we then read the preparation or giving of meals as a ritual act of worship on the part of women? The language and analysis of gift giving can be applied to this arena in an effort to better study the role of food and women's participation in that economy of family relationships.

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Judaism is replete with foodways in the forms of dietary restrictions and rituals of eating. There are those who say that all Jewish holidays can be summed up by the words: They tried to destroy us, we survived, let's eat! This witticism reveals a great deal about the nature of celebration and ritual feasting. Food is not merely what you do while you are celebrating or worshiping. It is often at the ritual core of most of our collective ceremonies. Its presence in Judaism is vital, linking the social and the sacred elements of human praxis. Thus, food feasting and sharing is part of a communal sense of obligation and a frequent holiday requirement (Wolowelsky 1977: 92–96). Not only Purim but also holidays such as Passover embrace food as central, not an incidental or supportive element. The sacred element of the meal is merged with the social and critical to the central themes of religious communal survival. The same can be said about women: They are neither incidental nor merely supportive factors in Jewish religious life. They are a necessary and sufficient part of the recipe for religious community survival.

One caveat: It is problematic to study women's kitchen practice in a feminist configuration since some might understand this as placing women back in the kitchen "where they belong." That erroneous misogyny is, of course, not the intention of this essay. Rather, the intent of this research (and the growing body of feminist food studies) is to explore and expose the world in which women did and do operate. Finding women's methods of operation in a patriarchal world has revealed arenas of unanticipated action and authority. It has not erased patriarchy but has nuanced our understanding of it and of women's ways and worlds. It is to that end that this study on women's foodways is directed.

Purim is a minor festival in the Jewish calendar. Celebrating the victory of the Persian Jews over their enemies in the fifth century BCE, it brings together many traditional themes and practices. Unlike the major festivals, there are only four ritual acts required: Recall and read the story of Esther (*megilat Esther*),<sup>3</sup> send food gifts to friends (*mishloach manot*), give presents to the poor (*matanot la'evyonim*), and eat a festive meal (*se'udat purim*). Since three of the four requirements are food related, we can easily classify this holiday as a food-based celebration.

The story of Esther's strategic and courageous defeat of Haman concludes with a command that Jews celebrate the event annually: "that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, and of sending portions from one to another, and gifts to the poor" (Esther 9:22). Thus the unique format of the current celebration was drafted in the biblical text itself. Some scholars believe that the custom of sending cooked meals or food delicacies to friends was a common ancient practice used for festive occasions. As an example, they cite the biblical book of Nehemiah (Chap. 8), which describes that food gifts were sent in joyous celebration when Ezra read the Torah on Rosh Hashanah (Schauss 1962). Josephus noted that the Jews would send servings of food to one another (Antiquities 2:6). By the third century, the legal tradition solidified in the Mishna (Meg. 7a) the obligation to send two cooked foods to at least one friend – the current practice is to send at least to two friends – and two gifts to the poor. It is important to emphasize the distinction between the two types of gifts mentioned here (Bush 1996). Both holiday gifts are food based: One is for the poor and one is not. Often women's religious acts are associated with – or limited to – giving food to the poor as a special mark of their piety and/or charity

(Sered 1992). But on Purim, there is a second quite separate deed that necessitates delivering food to a friend/neighbor. In the latter case, the rabbis interpret their added requirement for two cooked foods as a gift that should be ready to eat requiring no preparation by the recipient. Everybody, even the poorest Israelite, was bound by this custom.

This exchange of food then is not to be confused with charity. These gifts create a sense of peoplehood between tribal equals.<sup>4</sup> They act as reminders of a shared history and destiny and establish social relationships and boundaries (Ward 2000). They further locate relationships between families not just between individuals. These gifts emanate from a sense of joy and forge an acceptance of mutuality and friendship. The giving of homemade food generates intimacy and shared privacy and forces obligations, reciprocity, and affective relationships. According to John Cooper, “the Purim gift exchange of plates of delicacies ... led to a scrupulous re-evaluation every year of each family’s place in the local social hierarchy” (Cooper 1993). These gifts quite literally solidify community. And women direct, dominate, and create these ritual exchanges.

Given the dominance of women in food-related behavior in general, it should come as no surprise that these elements of culture and religion are ignored or denigrated. Yet even a cursory study of Judaism confirms food’s central importance and sacred texture. Food appears to play a profound part in Jewish communal identity and religious life, but the woman’s responsibility for this domain has not been seen as critically consequential. Her productive and religious power is hidden – ironically – even in a minor holiday like Purim, which recognizes the leadership of one woman, Esther, and in which the theme of concealment plays a significant role.

Nonetheless, the legal tradition itself is very concerned with these food gifts – *mishloach manot*. There is even discussion of whether a married woman must send her own gifts or whether she is exempted by sending gifts on her husband’s behalf. The Code of Jewish Law (*Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayim* 695:4) maintains that the individual woman is equally obligated in this ritual. Given women’s exemptions in other ritual arenas, this personal responsibility is noteworthy, even though there are disagreements. Since one purpose of the gift exchange is to form friendships, the sixteenth-century Rabbi Isserles advises that women give to women and men to men – thus guaranteeing proper modesty. This gender separation also avoids confusion about potential marriage. If a man were to send a gift to a woman (perhaps single or a widow), it might be construed as a gift of marriage and thereby become binding as an act of betrothal. It is interesting to note that the formal betrothal in Judaism required that the female receive a personal gift from the groom. The couple is not considered married until she publicly accepts the gift – usually a ring in contemporary practice, but it could be a date (that one eats) in Talmudic law – from the man. Placing the ring on her index finger is the ceremonial equivalent of her acknowledgment that she has accepted not a new ornament but marriage itself. Thus, gift giving has a legal component, is gender specific, and is exceptionally nuanced in Judaism.

Deciding whether women are part of their husband’s unit or stand on their own on Purim is suggestive of many other patriarchal judgments. Rabbi Gumbiner

(seventeenth century) claims that a wife is included in her husband's gift giving and therefore need not give individually. But in the nineteenth century, Rabbi Epstein (*Arukh Hashulhan* OH 695:18) stated, "even a married woman cannot fulfill this mitzvah through her husband's gift, as this is a personal obligation that she must do herself." This position is noteworthy since most Jews today treat the custom as a family-based obligation or performance. The gifts are exchanged between household units – no matter how many individuals reside therein – rather than between individuals. The gifts are further seen as social commitments and not always as expressions of a sacred duty (Shuman 2000: 498).

These deliberations are interesting in terms of the concern for the woman's ritual performance but also for what they do not address. Who prepares the gift? Why is it considered the husband's gift since his wife actually baked or bought the delicacies? Is this a reflection of the notion that while women "make it," men "celebrate it"? (Sered 1992: 102). The rabbis are very concerned with what constitutes an appropriate gift but neglect what establishes someone as a gift giver? As always, they assume the main player is the husband, never doubting the man's central role ritually as well as economically. In their estimation, the male, as head of the household, receives credit for all that is done in that unit. But all sociological studies of the Purim gift indicate that the female has always been the producer, organizer, and controller. Significantly, it is the women who generate the network of giving. Sociologically, she is at the center of the system and she dominates the activity and its direction. But is she seen as religiously central?

Mauss' early work on gift giving, although somewhat problematical in feminist terms, highlighted the complex meanings embedded in gifts (Mauss 1967). He was among the first to note that gifts can communicate status, obligation, freedom, identity, self-worth, and mutuality. Gifts might appear to be voluntary with no strings attached, but as a cultural institution the gift imposes a whole set of reciprocal obligations and social relationships. Mauss saw the gift exchange as compelling relationships between individuals and groups and solidifying their relations to other groups. He described it as a total cultural phenomenon linking social, legal, economic, political, moral, religious, and aesthetic arrangements. Accordingly, any gift exerts tremendous power by making individuals indebted to each other within a recognized communal configuration. The gift exchange then reflects and constructs community.

On Purim, women – usually married women with young children – decide what to give, how much to give, and most importantly to whom to give. They spend a great deal of time preparing and choosing and in the process circumscribe their family's social circle. It would be inappropriate to overestimate the power entrenched in women's domestic responsibility. There is a definite distinction between responsibility for and control over. Yet, Purim falls within the latter category. In every community, the women choose partners for giving and in so doing create or acknowledge intimate networks of friends. Unlike businessmen who depend on their wives or secretaries to send holiday gifts to their acknowledged business associates, the Purim exchange is managed and directed by women and can circumscribe existing and new circles of friendship. Traditionally, men, and sometimes children, act as the



delivery boys. But it is the woman who determines both the content and recipient of the gift. In doing so women determine social networks and value-added gift-giving processes.

*Mishloach manot* traditions vary from region to region. Since Purim is four weeks before Passover, for many householders this was the ideal opportunity to get rid of all the flour and other baking ingredients forbidden on Passover. Trays were filled with all sorts of sweets and “Haman” cookies.<sup>5</sup> The process was as Joan Nathan describes: “One woman would send a portion to a friend. Not to be outdone, the friend would repay the gift, with at least one additional sweet added to it. A third would fill her tray with still more delicacies and so on” (Nathan 1980: 15). The tradition of competitive giving was built in North America especially in the 1990s. It is ironic that if the initial process aided families to rid their homes of the forbidden flour (*chametz*) before Passover, the elaboration of this Purim gift exchange has produced exactly the opposite outcome. Nowadays homes fill up with all sorts of high caloric goodies unusable in the coming festival. The gift giving melds into a pastiche of overeating, of waste, and/or of recycling the gifts quickly. For as the women strive to outdo each other in a competitive bid of gift giving, they establish patterns of entertaining and eating that fit or display their socioeconomic status as it is or as they would like their neighbors to assume it is.

In Russia the Jews sent strudels, *taiglakh*, and *hamantaschen*. In Morocco, small breads filled with whole hard-boiled eggs were the center of platters of foods. Some contained cooked fish or poultry with pasta and honey-dipped pastries. In Iraq *sambousaks* were accompanied with sweet candied almonds. Newly married or engaged couples would receive special platters from prospective in-laws. In Lebanon and Egypt, deep-fried pastries filled with nuts and oozing honey were exchanged (Dobrinisky 1986). Fruits, fresh or dried, were also part of the package (Nathan 1980: 14–15). These foods were intended to promote happiness, which is supported by the stories in many memoirs. Pauline Wengeroff, in her autobiography *Rememberings*, describes the great joy of the day. “As I remember it, every Jew was always full of joy on that day, treating himself to good food and drink.... We children thought of nothing but sending and receiving *shlachmones*” (Wengeroff 2000: 30). In his memoir of life in Baghdad, David Kazzaz declares: “I also have fond memories of the sweets of Purim, when a cousin or servant would come to our house bearing a tray of sweets” (Kazzaz 1999: 56–57).

In the early years in North America, most Jews did not send Purim gifts. Those who did sent simple gifts with a home-baked cake or *hamentashen*. Sometimes the child who delivered the gift received a penny along with a reciprocal gift for the donor family. The popularity and intricacy of this custom increased after World War II. The ritual practice grew as some women continued to send homemade treats adding decorated trays or containers. Slowly women increased the quantity of foods including packaged goodies and candies. By the end of the twentieth century, some women developed theme *mishloach manot* with all sorts of elaborate artistic presentations. In the 1990s those themes upgraded to a “Martha Stewart” style with upscale gourmet foods, stylized presentations, and elaborate designs and themes. Some gifts even shadowed the popular novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* and presented an erotic

element (Ross 2015: 1). Competition was alive and well in this form of conspicuous creative gift giving. Some called it the Mishloach Manot Wars, while others celebrated this part of Purim as the “Super Bowl of Martha Stewart Judaism” (Ross 2015: 2). Obviously, some women love this extravaganza seeking the fun component, while others bemoan the excess. There have been new trends and developments initiated again by the women involved. Some of these include an emphasis on charity cards sent to friends and neighbors instead of the elaborate gift exchanges. But the food gift giving is officially mandated and continues in minimal and maximum intensities.

In all these variations, questions of the *kashrut* of the gift and the standards of the recipient shaped some of the packages and interchanges. Unsure of the donor’s or recipient’s standard for *kashrut*, some women bought objects with clearly marked kosher verifications. Accordingly, different standards of acceptable food generated smaller unambiguous networks within the community. Gift giving in this group circumscribed an endogamous ultra kosher elite. Some women resorted to sending their gifts through companies that specialized in Jewish gifts. This relieved the pressure on working women and on issues of varying levels of *kashrut*. But the gift giving continued to be seen as a personal necessity, as a model of and a metaphor for community commitment. Paradoxically, that was always seen as the responsibility of the women of the community: Food is women’s work even if food translates into communal power.

Remarkably, an innovation was introduced in the 1980s by a group of modern Orthodox women. They developed a computerized communal gift exchange system. Overwhelmed by the increasing demands and numbers of gifts, these women decided to computerize their gift exchange and organize a uniform, singular format. “By introducing an option of ‘exchange,’ mediated by a women’s organization instead of individual households, and administered by computer instead of the individual homemaker, some Orthodox Jewish women led their community’s efforts at self-reconstruction” (Sacks 1989: 275). All those who subscribed to the system would send in a list of names they wished to grace with a gift. Although the holiday is usually in March, this process begins as early as November. The committee buys the necessary items, and each participating household receives one package with a list of names of those who were gifting them. Everyone got the same package but the names were personally distinct. The excess money goes to an agreed-upon charity. This system has become very popular in North America, with many synagogues receiving between \$10,000 and 20,000 from this one event. There is even a reciprocal request available: One can request that if anyone not on their list chooses to send them a gift, their name is automatically added to the list and thus one is reciprocated immediately. Men and women now work on these projects together. One added benefit to this new format is the community established by the volunteers. For example, one synagogue in Montreal gifts over one thousand packages. The committee that processes these gifts consists of about one hundred and fifty men and women who usually work on this one committee every year (personal communication January 2016). They work for over 2 months together forming social bonds and networks that, for the most part, did not exist before. This then becomes a secondary

social benefit of the new gift-giving format. They become friends and a subcommunity within the larger synagogue community.

This shift to communal rather than familial formats can be found in other holiday celebrations. The Passover Seder or Shabbat meal that used to take place exclusively in the home is increasingly moving into the synagogue or community center. But the effect on family relationships and friendships circles is not yet obvious. This new system does indicate that a new base for family interactions can be found in the synagogue, school, or other charitable organizations rather than the traditional neighborhood. Intimacy is surrendered to efficiency, charity, and other exchanges. But charity was not the initial purpose of the Purim gift exchange. Whether this change and exchange will enable stronger or weaker family and communal ties is not yet evident.

Questions do linger. What has happened to women's ritual expertise and control, to intimacy, and to small social circles? Clearly, new systems relieve many women from the increasing burden of the holidays. It is especially helpful to women who work outside of the home. Although some may bemoan the loss of home-based praxis, many women continue to be the ones who drive the system and determine the Purim list. And the gift exchange still continues to create small social networks within the larger community of the synagogue. To be sure, not all Jewish communities and families are registered within these computerized or charitable Purim gift systems. Finally, even with the computerized system, many women continue to give at least two gifts privately, maintaining the tradition in its most basic format.

Given all the shifts and innovations in the case of Purim gift exchanges, it is still apparent through this research that women use food to create social and sacred space. Women do see themselves as socially and even religiously central in these ritual acts. Moreover, their gift giving is clearly based on a model of exchange with expectations of a return. The gifts they give are to be enjoyed by their social and religious equals; but they expect gifts of equal or greater value in return. They understand full well the creation of obligation and that this minor holiday establishes their social and religious circle in the coming year.

Can we extend this gift analysis to other elements of women's kitchen praxis? Do women create family by cooking dinner? Are their meals gifts that create and reflect the bonds and bounds of family and society? Do they consciously give and expect returns? If the holiday of Purim allows us to see Jewish women using the gift-giving process to create and reflect the social and religious networks of community, then is it possible to see those same women's use of family meals as mechanisms for establishing the family itself and their own central role within that nucleus? It is useless to argue that all meals create the ambience of a gift. But it is plausible to discern that some meals are meant as exchanges, which create debt and obligate recipients. Special meals with favorite dishes repeatedly offered up with care and love engender a whole cycle of liability and mutual obligations that bind the family into a series of relationships. These events can create and ultimately keep the family together. Perhaps those with special kosher and/or holiday foods are intended to even keep the family religious.

When a woman prepares a special meal for the family, does she see it as a gift? That is a difficult question that needs quantitative and qualitative research. But it could be argued that the presentation of the meal is often given the same thought and affect as a precious gift. As with gifts, refusal to accept the food is also perceived as a social faux pas; giving a gift obligates the recipient to accept it. So does giving of a special meal. Moreover, once accepted, especially given the repeated nature of the meals involved, a series of relationships are initiated from which one cannot withdraw. The family is formed in part through those meals and mother is the life giver of the family in more ways than one. Finally, the recipient is now obligated in some ways to repay the gift in the future. Unlike the Purim exchange, with its immediate concrete exchange, family meals create an indefinite responsibility, but one with a unique form of indebtedness. Somewhere there is a clause hidden in the food that states: Because I fed you, you will feed me when I need it. Or because I fed you kosher food, or holiday food, you will keep some element of this sacred custom. "I did this because it was good for you, out of the goodness of my heart, but you still owe me!" Family relationships are embedded in these meals, as the family is constituted in mother's gift of dinner. Similarly, tradition is embedded in these meals and it is imbibed and passed on through mother's gifts. Thus, the exchange may be brief or repeated and may be for the recipient alone or the entire family, but it comes with hidden reciprocal obligations that bind.

Interestingly, commercially prepared food seems to give women more time but less leverage. Psychologically homemade food represents love, a gift of oneself that cannot be ignored. Homemade food seems to have "psychological value that may even exceed its sensory and physiological contributions" (Shapiro 1996: 22). Mom's home cooking was a giving of a part of herself – something a child or spouse could neither refuse persistently nor discount. Eventually, the price has to be paid; the obligation must be reciprocated. But what is the price?

Conceivably, the price of mother's meals simply might be a family or a family that is tied to and respectful of mom. Or perhaps, at some later date, the expectation is that children will grow up and take care of mom, feed her, and create a family with/for her. Or perhaps the obligation is that the family will keep her traditions. But her loving meals are surely some form of gift, some sacrifice that women willingly surrender of their time and energy and produce for their family. And that is a gift.

Food giving transforms a moment of eating into a moment of sharing, of uniting people into new units. The gift of food creates an indebtedness that leads to diverse social networks and relationships; some of which can be quite long lasting. Food giving can give power to those powerless in other domains and it can yield social stratification way beyond its elemental value. Food gifts send social and cultural messages far beyond the nourishment offered.

Thus, following the current anthropological interest, the idiom of food can be understood as a conveyance of women's central role in sustaining, reinventing, and creating anew the Judaism of their respective households. Using food as a category enables us to see the ways in which women perform and preserve Jewish life through the rituals of appropriate daily and holy day food preparation. It sheds light on the role of women in maintaining family traditions and their control within that domain.

Examining the potency of food to maintain communal practices advances the premise of women's centrality and control through the role of gift giver. By focusing on this role, scholars draw attention to and can revisit nonmarket relations in a society that tends to value, and see, only market relations (Godelier 2002: 19–27).

As Mauss pointed out almost a century ago, gift giving is a significant aspect of social interaction. It generates networks within society that form and reform the very fabric of that society. In the type of Purim exchanges discussed above, women define their inner community as they describe allegiance to the larger one. They perform the ritual of giving, establishing their family's place within a cycle of obligatory giving, receiving, and reciprocating that is at the heart of the gift-giving circle. By including a mother's home cooked meal as a latent gift, we expand our understanding of women's roles as the controllers of a complex network of obligations both within and without the nuclear family. Highlighting these acts of sharing through religious rites enables a view of women with power even within patriarchal religions. At the same time that the public ceremony is described in purely androcentric terms, women are seen directing the interchange of relationships that will carry through the years.

Women's access to religion in both formal and informal settings can be described as secondary, invisible, or blocked. But their control over eating and feasting has given them a measure of authority and centrality and determined the way in which they act and communicate with their family and friends. It marks their critical importance in preservation of tradition in the household. Using food gifts as a category enables us to see the ways in which women perform and maintain religious life – despite their invisibility – through rituals of appropriate daily and holy day food preparation. It also sheds light on patterns of hospitality, the practice of which depends on men and women playing out distinctive but coordinated roles. Women give gifts as representatives of their families and of themselves. As a result, they define the core of the family's social and, dare I say, religious, network.

## Notes

1. Purim is the holiday celebrating the victory of the Jews over the Persians. The story is recounted in the biblical scroll of Esther.
2. This refers to the system of dietary laws for food that is fit to eat known as kosher food.
3. There is also a rabbinic liturgical addition of *al hanissim*.
4. Unlike the Potlatch gift exchange, which establishes a social and economic hierarchy
5. Traditional triangular cookies in the shape of either Haman's ear or hat. Eating the cookie symbolized destroying the evil enemy Haman.

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## Chapter 10

# Conditional Gifts for the Saints: “Gift” and “Commodity” as Gender Metaphors in Shi’a Ritual Practices in Iran

Azam Torab

In this paper, I assess “gift” and “commodity” as gender metaphors in two popular Shi’a Muslim rituals based on anthropological fieldwork conducted in Iran between 1992 and 1993.<sup>1</sup> I will compare women’s highly popular votive ritual meals called *sofreh* and men’s public rituals during the month of Muharram concerning the martyrdom of Imam Husseyn (AD 680), the third Shi’a Imam and grandson of the Prophet. By contrast to the acclaim and prominence enjoyed by the men’s Muharram rituals, which relate to a key event on the Shi’a Muslim calendar, *sofreh* are highly controversial and are often disparaged, or at best tolerated, by the religious establishment. The bias against women’s *sofreh* reminds of the discriminatory construct of two putative levels of “formal Islam” versus “popular belief” in some academic accounts.<sup>2</sup> “Formal Islam” is associated with the learned scholars (*ulama*), who are generally men. “Popular belief” is primarily linked with women, the illiterate and the rural. Indeed, although *sofreh* are extremely popular among women, they have not had the attention they deserve in academic texts, being often presented as “merely domestic” and of little concern other than to women themselves.<sup>3</sup> But, far from being merely “domestic”, women’s *sofreh* have much wider significance in terms of gender ideologies, as well as power and politics that men often claim as their prerogatives. “Gift” and “commodity” present useful tools for analysing these wider implications and in particular how categorical genders are formed and projected, but also contested, through the ritual activities which I present below.

My theoretical premise is derived from social anthropology where there is a vast debate on the radical opposition of “gift” and “commodity” as modes of exchange.<sup>4</sup> The two modes represent mutually exclusive metaphors for binary contrasts such as reciprocity, market exchange; equality, exploitation; common good, self-interest;

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and so on. Many studies challenge the dichotomy as being a modern western construct.<sup>5</sup> Bourdieu, for example, argues that “practice never ceases to conform to economic calculation even when it gives every appearance of disinterestedness” (1992: 177). Indeed, as Parry (1986) notes, Mauss (1954 [1925]) himself showed that contrary to popular assumptions, there is no such thing as a “pure gift”.

The polar opposition of “gift” and “commodity” exists nonetheless in most prescriptive religious traditions, as in Shi’a Islam. But my argument here is that although the conservative Shi’i forces construct “commodity” (as self-interested exchange) as feminine and associate it with women while constructing “pure gift” (as sacrifice) as masculine and associate it with men, the overlap in practice is considerable. In other words, I am arguing that “gift” and “commodity” are both masculinised and feminised in the context of the women’s votive meals and the men’s Muharram performances. Despite this overlap in the gendered metaphors, the radical opposition of “gift” and “commodity” and the gendered associations are upheld by the religious establishment. Even if current views on gender (*jens*, *jensiyat*) in Iran are diverse, contested and undergoing rapid change, including among the religious thinkers themselves, the distinction between the genders as self-evident and biologically fixed categories is crucial to an Islamic worldview and plays an important role in the organisation of everyday life in the Islamic Republic of Iran today.<sup>6</sup>

The self-evident assumptions about female and male have long been discarded by social anthropologists who have gone beyond seeing gender in terms of *women* and *men* or their relations. Gender is now seen as inherently flexible and contextually specific constructions encompassing many aspects of life beyond simply gender identity, roles and relations (Butler 1990a, b, 1993, MacCormack and Strathern 1995, Moore 1991: 7, 1994, Ortner and Whitehead 1989, Strathern 1988). This does not mean that individuals lack an ongoing sense of self. Nor does it mean the disappearance of powerful gender ideologies and discourses. Rather, symbolic representations are seen to be as crucial for gender analyses as gender is as a product of power and politics. I follow in particular Marilyn Strathern’s definition of gender as: “those categorizations of persons, artefacts, events, sequences, and so on which draw upon sexual imagery – upon the ways in which the distinctiveness of male and female characteristics make concrete people’s ideas about the nature of social relationships” (1988: ix). This view of gender as “category differentiation” means that the gender constructs do not simply concern *women* and *men* or their relations. Rather, “though the imagery of difference is sexually based, it orders a wide range of values and ideas” (Strathern 1989: 170).<sup>7</sup> Ritual activity is a powerful means for interpreting and managing the relations within and between the gendered oppositions, so that a range of possibilities emerges in performance. The two rituals that I will describe here are rich in scope and symbolism and are a key to understanding some of the values, beliefs and mechanisms that underpin gender constructions, as well as some of the ways in which they are challenged, in the complex society that is Iran today.

## Women's Votive Meals: *Sofreh*<sup>8</sup>

Women's votive ritual meals are convivial affairs and are extremely popular among women. The ceremony is called literally "votive meal cloth" (*sofreh-e nazri*, or simply *sofreh*) from which the ceremony derives its name. Invited guests share the votive meal in the home around the meal cloth (*sofreh*), which is traditionally spread on the floor. Each ceremony is dedicated to a supernatural spirit or a Shi'a saint who acts as intercessor with God for requests and favours.<sup>9</sup> The established saints are the 12 male Imams, who are the Prophet's successors, and some female saints, notably the Prophet's daughter *Hazrat-e Fatemeh* (*Hazrat*, an honorific title) and his grand-daughter *Hazrat-e Zeynab*. The saints are revered and held in high esteem, and making vows to them is a regular feature of everyday life among practising Shi'a Muslims across class. The saints also act as primary role models for morality and ethics. The male Imams, Imam Husseyn in particular, are associated with leadership of the Shi'a community ('*ummat*) and play an important political role. In addition to the established saints, some favour less prominent saints as intercessors with God for personal requests. Most popular are Imam Husseyn's infant girl *Hazrat-e Roqiyeh* and unidentified supernatural spirits, whom the religious authorities do not recognise, such as the female spirits called Lady Houri, Lady Light or Lady Tuesday (*Bibi Hur*, *Bibi Nur*, *Bibi Seshanbeh*).<sup>10</sup> They are particularly popular in rural areas or among the urban poor and migrants, whose marginalised status corresponds to the ambiguous, hence peripheral, status of the supernatural spirits and minor saints they choose to make their vows. Even though the religious authorities recognise vows as a means of approaching God and honouring the saints, they criticise the unrecognised supernatural spirits to whom individuals may make vows, treating the *sofreh* varieties dedicated to them as products of ignorance (*jahl*) and superstition (*khorafat*) or as selfish "innovations" (*bid'a*), hence un-Islamic. Women themselves, however, regard their *sofreh* ceremonies as perfectly compatible with Islamic belief and practice.

The choice of a saint depends on their perceived accessibility, their empathy with the problem at hand and their responsiveness. A popular designation for the most accessible saints is "gateway to favours" (*Bab-ol-Hava'ej*).<sup>11</sup> Notably, Imam Husseyn is not among them, despite his more general significance. People often refer to their favourite saints as friends or relatives who are expected to help in times of need, and making vows to a favoured saint is seen to be particularly efficacious and propitious (*mojjarab*) for obtaining results. Direct appeals to God are seen to be less effective than through the intercession of a saint. I was told jestingly, "To reach God, we need to pull strings as we do to reach an important person in our daily lives". The perception of a distant God who can be reached more effectively through the saints is comparable to the common practice of lobbying (*parti-bazi*) in daily life, whereby the disempowered find powerful persons to help resolve their problems.<sup>12</sup>

A vow (*nazr*) is a "conditional gift" that precisely seeks to bind the will of God into fulfilling requests or favours (*morad*, *hajaj*, *pl. hava'ej*) in return for an offering

(*nazri*) specified in advance. Offerings can be simple or elaborate, requiring various degrees of money and effort. Examples include giving alms, a charitable gesture, recitations (*zikr*) from the Qur'an, fasting for a specified length of time, proffering respect to a saint by visiting their shrine or simply distributing a mixture of so-called problem-solving nut mixture (*ajil-e moshgel-gosha*) during a ceremony. Particularly popular are offerings of food cooked by the women and shared around the meal cloth with invited guests at the *sofreh* ceremony. Some votive dishes are cooked on specific religious anniversaries for distributions to the public from door to door, or at shrines, in mosques, or at gravesites as a charitable deed for the benefit of the deceased spirits.

The record of saintly intercession is impressive with fierce competition in intercession accounts. I heard remarkable stories of cures from terminal illness and infertility, of the resolution of marital disputes, of help with children's welfare and education and of relief from financial burdens or debts and housing problems. The saints are seen as powerful benevolent figures who can work miracles. When problems are resolved, it is ascribed to divine providence rather than to other causes or to the agency of the individual making the vow.<sup>13</sup> The slippage between human agency and the miraculous is central to the votive practices. It may reinforce the notion of God as sole provider, but it also legitimises social or political claims of the supplicants in religious terms. Thus, as well as serving the interests of the community at large in matters of morality and ethics, the saints also serve individual interests. Much like Victor Turner's (1961, 1967) notion of the "multivocal symbol", the saints have multiple roles with a "fan of meanings" that may coexist in harmony, but they are often also in tension with each other.

Many creative varieties of *sofreh* exist; each one is associated with a particular saint.<sup>14</sup> The occasion may be a more or less subdued one, with recitations from the Qur'an or chanting of dirges, or it may be joyous with merrymaking, sometimes controversially involving dancing.<sup>15</sup> Very often, the serious and the joyful are combined. Invited female religious cantors may provide the ambience and mood appropriate to a religious ceremony, singing poems of praise (*mowludi*) to saints or dirges (*zikr-e mosibat*) as required. She will usually inaugurate the meal in the name of God, consecrating the food with recitations of prayers and intercessionary supplications (*du'a-ye tavassol*) in the name of the Shi'i saints.

The display of meals ranges from the simplest to the most elaborate, often corresponding to the perceived stature and significance of the saint in question for the Shi'a community. The most lavish meals are dedicated to the prominent saints, such as Imam Husseyn's half-brother *Hazrat-e 'Abbas* who is held in high esteem for his exceptional bravery at the battle of Karbala (AD 680) during which Imam Husseyn was slain. It is said that *Hazrat-e 'Abbas* sacrificed his life fetching water for Husseyn's thirsting infants, thereby ensuring the survival of the Prophet's line of male successors. The meals dedicated to him reach levels of conspicuous display, becoming a means of validating and legitimising relative prosperity or wealth in religious terms. The simple meals, such as simply a thick soup (*'ash*) made of herbs, beans or lentils, which are common among the marginalised sections of society, the urban and rural poor, are often dedicated to the minor saints. For instance, the one

dedicated to Imam Husseyn's infant girl *Hazrat-e Roqiyeh* consists usually of bread, fresh herbs, cheese or dates only. Another popular *sofreh* which is dedicated to Lady Hourī, Lady Light or Lady Tuesday centres around a dish called *kachi*, consisting of a sweet, golden brown paste of flour tossed in oil and scented with saffron and rose-water. These two ingredients are considered to be religiously meritorious and are used in most traditional votive dishes. Votive *sofreh* offer, therefore, a wide spectrum of possibilities. They allow for displays of pious virtue, social competence or competitive displays. The differences are a function of social, economic and political factors that are expressed through religious practice.

Votive foods, even the simplest varieties, have wider symbolic reference. Traditional votive dishes (such as *kachi*, *halva*, *shol-e zard* and *samanu*) cooked by women bear markedly regenerative associations. This is underlined by the fact that they are served for key moments of renewal and transition like birth, death, the procurement of health and worship (Torab 1998: 185–87; 2005: 213–14). A good example is *samanu*. This dish is made from germinating wheat, using a particularly laborious process. An analogy between germinating the grain and the swelling of the womb is obvious (Bourdieu 1992 [1972]: 116), suggesting the female principle of fertility. Significantly, *samanu* is associated with the craving of *Hazrat-e Fatemeh* during pregnancy. It must be noted that the Prophet had no sons and his succession was by way of his daughter and her husband Imam 'Ali, who was a patrilineal cousin of the Prophet and the first Shi'a Imam. Thus, in terms of a gender symbolism associated with women's choice of votive food, women express a collective agency in terms of their experience of their bodies, through which they lay claims to the reproduction of the human, natural and cosmological worlds in this patrilineal order.<sup>16</sup>

Votive food is distinguished conceptually from similar food outside the ritual context, even if cognitively they are virtually indistinguishable. The reason is that votive food is widely attributed with extraordinary power and potency because of its association with divine grace (*barakat*). People identify *barakat* as bounty, prosperity, good fortune, well-being and so on. Food imbued with *barakat* is believed to have the power to transform through ingestion; hence, it is eagerly sought and eaten.<sup>17</sup> Those taking part in *sofreh* ceremonies are encouraged to take small portions of the votive food to share with other members of their household. Even though all food is said to "be" God's *barakat*, only votive food is talked about as "being imbued with" *barakat* (*tabarrok shodan*). Hubert and Mauss (1964 [1898]) demonstrated long ago that ritual activity sacralises things, people or events, rather than ritual merely reflecting ideas already present (Bell 1992: 15). In effect, people become possessors of *barakat* through the actions that women undertake and by being treated as such.<sup>18</sup>

In short, ritual food is conceived of as a channel for grace, and thus it is linked to ideas about agency and power. Ideas about regeneration and renewal are here feminised through the trope of food, with women as the recognised conduits. The women's votive meals are thus a means of negotiating the relationship between self, society and the transcendent. Representations of these practices in some of the official discourses as "selfish" or commodity-like exchanges with the supernatural

obscure both the strong underlying sense of renewal associated with women's fecund dishes and female power to nurture and create life.

The controversy over women's votive ceremonies is based on the construct that women in particular are susceptible to desire, envy, excess and selfish acts. This gender ideology is entrenched in the Islamic traditions and is particularly well known and amply discussed in the feminist scholarship.<sup>19</sup> The argument presented by the conservative religious scholars is that while men and women may be equal before God, they have different mental and emotional capacities. Clearly, this view is in turn linked to ideas about agency, autonomy and morality. The key to understanding this discourse is the underlying binary gendered categories of *'aql* and *nafs*, which are frequently used in the Islamic traditions and contexts and have been discussed by a number of authors with regard to their gender implications.<sup>20</sup> *'Aql* is usually translated as reason or rationality and associated with the realms of order, control and morality, which is valued above *nafs*, the animal part of human nature and the carnal, desirous, passionate aspects of self associated with the realms of disorder and lack of control.<sup>21</sup> *'Aql* is constructed as primarily masculine and is associated more with men, and *nafs* is constructed as feminine and is associated more with women. It reminds of the familiar Cartesian mind/body legacy in some gender discourses in the West, which value the mind above the body (Gatens 1991, Lloyd 1984).

It is not so much that women themselves are devalued in the conservative gender discourses. Rather, it is what women supposedly represent, although a bias against women is often an effect of such conceptualisations. For instance, the religious rules concerning vowing (*ahkam-e nazr*) stipulate that women must obtain their husband's permission to make vows.<sup>22</sup> Clearly, this rule implies that women might make selfish vows based on the construct of women as less rational than men, and is hence intended as a means of control over women. In the religious discourses, overt concerns with material needs, excessive envy or desire are best deferred until the world to come. An ideology of restraint with reward in the hereafter promotes an imaginary ideal and ethos of equality. It denies the reality of social and material exclusion, serving the interests of those in positions of authority who fail to provide the material necessities of life for those who are marginalised by gender, class and so on.

Women clearly reject the ideology that calls for restraint and which tells them not to make vows for selfish ends. Their vows express a desire for things denied, but to which they feel they have a right. Appeals to supernatural agents are a means of reclaiming the promises of justice and equality that was a maxim of the Iranian revolution of 1978–1979. Dependence on the saints to fulfil desires is what makes life possible against overwhelming odds. Although such hope is vulnerable to disappointment and despair, it can be a fuel for political action, transforming “domestic” activity into a political agency. In this sense, vows may be personal, but never private. They are frequently a function of economic deprivation. But *sofreh* are not simply a function of economic deprivation. These convivial meals also provide possibilities for “distinction” (Bourdieu 1986) through lavish displays, including

among the prosperous middle classes. Distinction itself is thereby moralised (cf. Bruck, v. 2005: 268).

Vows do have ends in mind. Offerings are “conditional” gifts that precisely seek to bind the will of God to the will of self and by implication the will of those in positions of authority into taking responsible action. In other words, by paying deference to the saints, vows are intended to induce debt, so that they can be described a form of submission that generates debt. To compare these votive practices to a crude economic model of maximising self-interest and rational choice would be misleading, as it presupposes the existence of equal choice for all. Nor can the discourse of “pure gift” or disinterested piety serve people with limited options. Individuals shape their aspirations according to what seems to them accessible and possible and they resort to the cultural means at their disposal.

In practice, the women do not see their votive practices as self-indulgent or selfish. Food sharing is itself a key symbol of equality and a means of striving for harmony (Tapper and Tapper 1986: 67). The intention is to maintain and extend social linkages and supportive networks. Unlike contractual agreements in the market, where social relations end when the contract ends, the ceremonial votive exchanges create moral obligations for reciprocity. Moreover, reward is not assured but merely expected, as in the realm of gift exchange. Consistent with Mauss (1954), who asserts that a gift always “implies” (does not assure) a return, *sofreh* are a prime example of the way in which humans enter into relational debts with each other and with the saints through canons of hospitality, food and respect. Successful vows generate further vows and more *sofreh*, which in turn generate further social exchanges that continue even after the fulfilment of a vow. In fact, ties of “quasi” kinship may be created through the *sofreh* and the sharing of *barakat*.<sup>23</sup> Votive *sofreh* are therefore sites where women mask and reshuffle the gendered values of “gift” and “commodity” to accommodate their claims. Writing on women and the market in Morocco, Deborah Kapchan writes that the talent for turning “commodity” into “gift” permits women to accommodate their claims in the commodity realm and to find a social space they can control (1996: 176–77).<sup>24</sup>

## Men’s Muharram Rituals<sup>25</sup>

Set against women’s convivial votive meals are the men’s Muharram rituals. These spectacular public ceremonies relate to a key event on the Shi’a Muslim calendar concerning the martyrdom (*shahadat*) of Imam Husseyn (AD 680). Much has been written on these rituals, in particular about their role for political action, including the Iranian revolution of 1978–1979.<sup>26</sup> The very public nature of these rituals has contributed to the attention they have received ever since the visits to Iran by early travellers.<sup>27</sup> During these ceremonies, men re-enact the stories of Husseyn’s tragic death in the battle of Karbala (in present day Iraq), as he and his small band of followers fought against the Sunni forces.<sup>28</sup> The battle concerned the conflict over the leadership of the Muslim community (*‘umma*) after the Prophet’s death, which the



Shi'i ground in the Prophet's patriline by way of his daughter Fatemeh. Up to this day, Imam Husseyn's martyrdom presents the rationale for political action. This is based on the idea that if justice (*haqq*) is to prevail, then one must be prepared to die in its cause. The Shi'a sources designate Imam Husseyn as "king of martyrs" (*seyyed-e shohada*) who sacrificed himself in the cause of faith. His martyrdom dominates Shi'a Islam and shapes its theology. It is presented as the paradigmatic act of sacrifice, providing believers a sense of self-renewal and victory over death.

The men's Muharram rituals are well-rehearsed performances and are intended to be impressive. Large-scale chest-beating street processions (*dasteh-ye sineh-zani*), passion plays (*shabih*) and dirge rituals (*rowzeh*) are performed over ten consecutive days, all of which are sponsored and performed by men's powerful religious associations (*hey'at*) that are formed around a similar trade or profession or neighbourhood ties. Beginning on the first day up until the tenth of the month of Muharram, when Imam Husseyn was slain, each ceremony re-enacts the heroic deeds of the Karbala martyrs, thereby inadvertently linking their heroism to the men that re-enact it.<sup>29</sup>

The most emotive are the dirge rituals (*rowzeh*, Arabic "garden", a conventional metaphor for paradise, which promises a life everlasting for those who are worthy). Skilled cantors chant melodically the narratives of bravery and tragedy in poetic couplets, frequently giving rise to weeping and tears among the audience that accompanies the lead with rhythmic chest beatings and refrains. The Karbala narratives are rich in imagery. Significantly, they evoke the immortality of Imam Husseyn's blood. Blood is the central trope in all the Muharram-related rituals, but the street processions in particular.

The street processions (*dasteh*) are spectacular shows, attracting large crowds of onlookers, many women included. They belong to competing religious associations (*hey'at*) that strive to give the most impressive shows despite the sincerity and piety of the men. Rows of black-shirted men with unshaven beards progress slowly in an orderly manner around the streets, pounding their chests with the palms of their hands (*sineh-zani*) or flagellating their shoulder blades with chain flails (*zanjeer zani*) to the beat of drums, braying of trumpets and dirges (*nowheh*) relayed over loudspeakers. Ahead of each procession are strong men who carry Husseyn's battle standard and emblem (*'alam va kotal*) bearing elaborate displays of metal armour, relics and figurines. These heavy objects are skilfully balanced by men on their shoulders, showing off their muscular strength. These processions easily recall military parades, and the atmosphere is more akin to heroism, manliness and martial stoicism of devout fighters, apart from self-mortification or penitence for an event long past.<sup>30</sup> Onlookers are nonetheless often moved to tears. Notably, lamentations for Imam Husseyn are widely regarded as religiously meritorious and propitious for the granting of favours by Husseyn.

As the tenth day approaches, the street processions become increasingly emotive and the self-flagellations more frenzied. Traces of blood from self-inflicted chain lashes suggest the willingness of an army of devotees for self-sacrifice on the battlefield. These self-described "lovers of Husseyn" (*'asheqan-e Hosseyn*) identify with Imam Husseyn's act of sacrifice. The theme of sacrifice is underlined further by the



controversial slaughter sheep in front of Imam Husseyn's much-revered emblem and battle standard.<sup>31</sup> The point is that the Muharram rituals cannot be simply reduced to its political function for or against governments of the time. Rather, the rituals cultivate ideals of manliness enacted through images of devout fighting men, who, like Imam Husseyn, are prepared to sacrifice themselves for their faith, thereby asserting the continuity of the patriline for which Imam Husseyn gave his life. The ideal enduring aspect of the Shi'i community is thereby constructed by reference to the body and the blood of deceased males.

The ceremonies conclude with the circumambulation of Imam Husseyn's battle standard in the mosque and the distribution of the sacrificial meal called "Imam Husseyn's meal", which is considered to be "full of grace" (*por barakat*). It consists usually of lavish portions of rice and meat cut in small cubes (*gheymeh*), which some people say is meant to remind of Imam Husseyn's cut-up body.<sup>32</sup> Men cook these meals in large cauldrons for distribution to the general public as a highly meritorious act. They are sponsored by the men's wealthy religious associations and designated popularly as "expenditure" (*kharji*). This economic term reflects the trading background of the men, but crucially also promotes the image of the male "provider". Levels of generosity and hospitality are generally expected to correspond to the wealth and position of sponsors. This is meant to prevent feelings of indebtedness in those who are placed in positions of receivers but cannot reciprocate in kind. But it also benefits the rich, in that their wealth is purged from taints of selfishness and thus is legitimised in religious terms.

This gracious dispensation of open-handed "expenditure" is crucial to the maintenance of social credit and political influence of men. The rich are therefore doubly rewarded. Their wealth is transformed into disinterested "generosity" or "pure gift", which reaps spiritual reward (*'ajr*) and merit (*savab*) as well as social prestige. This is "a sacrifice designed to win in return the blessing of prosperity" (Bourdieu 1992: 180). They thereby gain a competitive edge, which alters their relationship to others. To follow Mauss (1954), unreciprocated gifts while bringing credit to the donor actually keep the recipient who cannot reciprocate in perpetual debt, legitimising a system of moral patronage that is represented as honourable and disinterested, apparently motivated only by ideals of religious merit. Generosity and merit do not temper privilege; indeed the process of charitable activity serves to endorse and reproduce it (Bourdieu 1992:180). Thus, although the men's Muharram rituals are represented in terms of a "pure gift" economy of sacrifice, the actions that men take are neither apolitical nor disinterested. Despite a communal ethos, the ceremonies are ostentatious, promoting the men's prestige as well as serving their political interests in the patrilineal order.

## Sacrifice: The Tropes of Food and Blood

Many authors argue that sacrifice is a powerful symbol of societal renewal linked with the idea of paternity and the political authority of men.<sup>33</sup> The symbolism of sacrifice is central to the men's Muharram ritual performances. The social context

of Husseyn's sacrifice is patriliney. It is performed primarily by men, and it serves to maintain a patrilineal order, denying the value of maternal descent. The gender constructs intersect here with assumptions about the body and its substances (i.e. blood), which are in turn linked with theories of descent that have much wider ideological implications for the organisation of society, which address gender inequalities in terms of power and control over social and material resources.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, the Karbala narratives celebrate the immortality of maleness only based on the trope of Husseyn's blood, which evokes him as the sacrificial victim to preserve the faith. Male blood is presented as the edifying essence of life, which lives on and endures beyond death. This idea continues to be used in the context of modern political conflicts and is iconically represented by fountains of gushing red water in the cemeteries of the martyrs of the Iranian revolution (1978–1979) and the war with Iraq (1980–1988). This means that a martyr's blood results not only in the re-creation of the deceased but also in the regeneration of society.

There are striking parallels between Imam Husseyn's act of sacrifice in the month of Muharram and other sacrificial rites, such as the mass sacrifice of sheep that culminates the Meccan hajj in the month of *Dhu al-Hijjah* immediately preceding Muharram.<sup>35</sup> Both occur on the tenth day of their respective month. Also, the circumambulation of Husseyn's battle standard in the mosque on the tenth day of the Muharram street processions recalls the circumambulation of the *Ka'ba* ("God's house") by the pilgrims in the Meccan hajj. The Meccan hajj, in turn, relates to the classic story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his only son, as noted by various scholars.<sup>36</sup> The story of Abraham is generally understood to be the founding myth of the three monotheisms. Its moral and political messages have engaged the attention of various academic scholars, though with different interpretations, not least within Islamic textual traditions. However, as various authors argue, the Abrahamic sacrifice is marked by gender dichotomy and an outright exclusion of women, making it an authoritative discourse for controlling the religious meaning that legitimates a patriarchal order.<sup>37</sup>

Religious ideology makes believe that Imam Husseyn's sacrificial blood stands for the Shi'a community as a whole. This corresponds to the standard model of sacrifice as a general, unifying symbol of societal regeneration. But, this ideal celebrates male blood only, becoming in practice a divisive rather than the unifying trope it is supposed to be. The construction of male blood as being regenerative is opposed to a construction of the female, menstrual womb blood as dead and polluting, which is surrounded by extensive taboos. This symbolic exclusion of the female body from the story of creation makes martyrdom such a powerful discourse of masculinity, so that competing understandings are silenced. This may explain why the notion of martyrdom is rarely associated with women. They are celebrated as "mothers of martyrs" for raising valiant sons prepared to die for their faith as the quintessential act of motherhood. If the Prophet's daughter Fatemeh is *presented* as having died a martyr, she is always *represented* as the paragon of sexual purity, echoing the Christian notion of the "virgin birth". Much like Mary, the female model of "mother, wife and daughter" has become the master narrative that seeks to

control Fatemeh's significance as the sole link between the Prophet and his male successors.

Sacrifice is of course a polythetic category (Needham 1975), a mere pointer to a cluster of phenomena contained within a wider family of rituals. Anthropological theories see sacrifice as communication with the divine, involving consecration, sacrificial offering and its consumption (Hubert and Mauss 1964). It need not be linked to the shedding of blood. Any form of offering can substitute the sacrificial victim, the paramount intention being to submit to divine will.<sup>38</sup> In fact, in terms of symbolism and structure, women's *sofreh* bear obvious parallels to sacrificial rites, while being strongly suggestive of the female principle of fertility. There is an offering of food, expressions of intention (*niyyat*), dedication to the saints and communal consumption of the food as a channel for divine grace, establishing thereby a link between the mundane and the sacred, as in the classic model of sacrifice.<sup>39</sup> However, as Nancy Tapper (1983) argues, gender constructions obscure women's relation to sacrificial acts dominated by Abraham's paradigmatic model. It comes therefore as no surprise that the relationship of women's *sofreh* rituals to broader notions of societal renewal and fecundity has not had the same attention as the men's rituals for Imam Husseyn's martyrdom during Muharram.

Carol Delaney (1986) points out that the narrative of paternity has always positioned the male as the sole creator. Recent studies of personhood show that social identity is not tied to the metaphor of blood as a relationship, but that substances such as food can play a determining role. Indeed the more recent anthropological focus on nurturance as a means of creating ties of "quasi" kinship adds complexity to the initially simple picture of genealogy and blood.<sup>40</sup> Representations of *sofreh* by the religious establishment as selfish obscure both the strong underlying sense of renewal associated with women's fecund dishes and female power to nurture and create life. The contrast with establishment notions of renewal is marked. Against the Karbala story centred on the model of Abraham's paradigmatic act of sacrifice, which is linked to paternity and the political authority of men, we can set the fecund, swelling grains of the women's *sofreh* dishes that act as a channel for *barakat*, which women share with others and which bear markedly regenerative associations, suggesting the female principle of fertility.

## Concluding Remarks

Conservative discourse in Iran upholds a categorical gender difference in terms of the following homologous contrasts:

male: female

gift: commodity

sacrifice: self-interest

Muharram rituals: *sofreh*

men: women

This discourse does not necessarily suggest the denigration of women, gender antagonism or domination. As Marilyn Strathern states, “the ‘sexual antagonism’ thesis unwittingly reinscribes gender opposition as a fixed structure” (1989 [1981]: 169). It implies a coexisting, dualistic and mutually exclusive model of gender, rather than a much broader understanding in social anthropology that sees gender as inherently flexible and as contextually specific constructions, on which this article is based.<sup>41</sup> In the context of the two rituals presented here, the categorical gendered contrasts become blurred. Thus, ideas about renewal and regeneration are both masculinised and feminised as contextually specific constructions. Men regard sacrifice or “pure gift” as their prerogative through the trope of blood shed by self-flagellating men in semblance of sacrifice, while women lay claim to their role as powerful agents of renewal through the trope of the votive foods they cook and share with others. On the other hand, elements of self-interest are present in both the men’s and the women’s rituals, even if personal interests are aligned with the wider social good. The instability of gender is revealed particularly well through the ambiguous and metaphorical language of ritual, where gender ideologies can be at the same time projected and renewed, yet also challenged and destabilised, providing the possibilities of self-expression, innovation and incremental change in the gender constructs.

The insistence on a male/female contrast through an apparent separation of the sexes in either all-female or all-male activities is nonetheless important for making social and political claims. But despite the separation of the sexes, each sex depends on the other to assert a unitary identity as male or as female. In practice, both sexes participate in each other’s activities by implication. Women, for example, participate in the men’s rituals of martyrdom, either in their own right or as spectators, even though they in turn may criticise the “male activities” as showmanship. When the men show off their muscular strength, the presence of women as audience on the side suggests men’s dependency on women as the enabling cause that affirms their maleness.<sup>42</sup> Men too make vows and can act as sponsors for women’s votive meals, asking them to act on their behalf in activities that they themselves ostensibly condemn as spurious “female activities”. This idea of separate, unitary genders needs to be upheld and is insisted upon as a sphere of political agency.<sup>43</sup> As Judith Butler argues, the gender ideologies are so powerful and institutionally inscribed within the frame of heterosexual reproduction, so that gender coherence is desired and idealised, while gender discontinuities and instabilities are concealed (1990a: 335–36). In other words, normalised gender discourses are, paradoxically, enabling (Butler 1993: 109).

Processes of gendering may be “symbolic”, but they are important for social action and for the promotion of political interests. By laying claim to the “pure gift” ideology as their prerogative, men need to be “men” to make wider claims in terms of power, politics and patrilineality. Women in turn insist on their collective agency as “women”, thereby laying claims to social and cosmological regeneration in terms of their fecund votive foods while accommodating their claim in the commodity realm. In terms of a gender symbolism, the all-male and all-female ritual activities create “unitary genders”, expressing an agency through which each sex can lay

social, political and cosmological claims in a sphere that is under their control. In this context, discourses of morality vie with those of politics and self-interest. In the process, the gendered boundaries of gifting become blurred and extend their range, paradoxically highlighting its contingent nature. Women are involved in “gift giving”, even though it is not always recognised as such. The monopoly of gifting that men claim is thus put into question.

## Notes

1. This paper was written during my Research Fellowship at Clare Hall (1999–2004), University of Cambridge. I have addressed the diversity of ritual activity and their significance for gender constructions in Iran more fully in my full-length book *Performing Islam* (Torab 2007; see in particular Chaps. 4 and 5).
2. For helpful discussions and overviews on the distinction between so-called formal and informal Islam, see Eickelman (1998: 249ff.), Jansen (1987: 86–91), Lambeck (1990) and N. Tapper and R. Tapper (1987: 69–71).
3. See Adelhah (1991: 147–48), Betteridge (1989 [1980]: 104, 108–9), Braswell (1975: 160–67), Hedayat (1963), Kalinock (2003), Shokurzadeh (1967), cf. Jamzadeh and Mills (1986: 35, 50–55) and Torab (2007: Ch.4, 2005, and 1998: 178–88, 424–31).
4. The opposition is attributed largely to C. A. Gregory (1982).
5. Studies that challenge such dichotomies include Appadurai, (1992 [1986]), Gell (1996), Humphrey and Hugh-Jones (1992), Parry and Bloch (1996 [1989]), cf. Parry (1986) and Strathern (1988: 143–47).
6. On the gender views and the changing debates among religious thinkers in contemporary Iran, see Mir Hosseini (1999, 2002 a, b, c).
7. Strathern (ibid.) acknowledges similar remarks made earlier by La Fontaine (1977) and Ortner (1974).
8. Some of the passages relating to the *sofreh* ritual have been published in a previous article (see Torab 2005). I use these passages here in a summary form for the comparative project.
9. The term “saint” has different connotations in Christianity and in Islam (see Eickelman 1998: 278). I use the term here merely as a pointer. On the problems of translation of notions that are neither universal nor necessarily homogeneous within the same society, Needham (1975) suggests viewing these as “polythetic” category (with sporadic resemblances), rather than “monothetic” (with definite features) that risks exclusion of significant features in comparative studies.
10. For a detailed account of a *sofreh* dedicated to *Bibi Hur* and *Bibi Nur*, see Torab (2007: 121–25, and 120n10, for further references).
11. The five are *Hazrat-e* Fatemeh, Imam Husseyn’s half-brother (*Hazrat-e* ‘Abbas, also known as ‘*Abol Fazl*), two of Imam Husseyn’s infant children (*Hazrat-e* Roqiyyeh and *Hazrat-e* Ali ‘Asghar) and the seventh Imam Musa ibn-e Ja’far (or

- Musa Kazem). *Hazrat-e Zeynab*, *Imam Husseyn's* sister, is also popular, as are a host of other, unidentified spiritual spirits.
12. On the pervasive lobbying in Iran, see also Beeman (1986: 48). See also Eickelman, who notes that in Morocco, relations with the supernatural are similar to those between people (1998: 283).
  13. Cf. Christian (1989), who argues that for the Spanish community of his study, the underlying assumption in communications with God is a theory of action by God as a result of actions by humans
  14. For various descriptions of *sofreh*, see the references in note 3 above.
  15. For the discourses and tensions between a moralistic approach to religious practice and the desire for merrymaking, including the controversies surrounding dancing, see Torab (2007: 97–98, 217–18).
  16. Cf. Moore (1999: 28) for a similar observation in women's rituals elsewhere
  17. The ingestion of food imbued with *barakat* is similar to the bread in Holy Communion officiated by the Church and hence also unlike it, in that *barakat* is in theory accessible without an intermediary.
  18. For similar remarks about *barakat*, see Gellner (1962), to whom also Douglas refers with a quote (1966: 112).
  19. For overviews on gender and current debates among Iranian Shi'i scholars, see Mir Hosseini (1999, 2002a, b, c).
  20. See, for example, Abu-Lughod (1986: 90–91, 283–84 n.6), Anderson (1982: 405–9, 1985), Eickelman (1998: 197–98), Kapchan (1996: 104, 107, 116), Rosen (1984: 31–47), N. Tapper (1991: 15 ff), Tapper and Tapper (1988), R. Tapper and N. Tapper-Lindisfarne (n.d. ca. 1990) and Torab (1996; 1998; Torab 2005).
  21. The words '*aql* and *nafs*' are themselves polysemic, with many implicit meanings, and may, for example, have different connotations in Sufi and mystical dimensions of Islam. See Schimmel (1975).
  22. See rule number 2644 in Ayatollah Khomeini's book of precepts, translated by J. Borujerdi (1984).
  23. On the ways in which "quasi" kinship ties may be created through ritual and sharing food, see Carsten (1995 and 1997) and also Eickelman (1998: 147), who refers to Marilyn Strathern.
  24. For a slightly different interpretation, see Nancy Tapper, who argues that in Turkey the ideologies of "pure gift" and "market" deny women full participation in both domains so that women's vows to the saints combine only muted aspects of both, expressing thereby their marginality as a self-fulfilling ideology (1990: 251–53).
  25. For more detailed versions of these rituals, see Torab (2007: 139–69 and 1998: 45–51; 144–51).
  26. For studies of the Muharram rituals in Iran, see, for instance, Alberts (1963), Algar (1972), Akhavi (1980), Chelkowski (1979), Chelkowski and Dabashi (1999), Fischer (1980), Hegland (1983a, b, 1991), Keddie (1972), Tapper (1979), Thaiss (1972, 1973) and Torab (1998: 45–51; 144–151). For elsewhere in the Middle East, see Fernea (1965) [Iraq]; see Gilsenan (1990 [1982])

- [Lebanon], Hegland (1998, 1995 a, b) [Pakistan], Pinault (1992) and Aggarwal (1971: 161–65) [India] and Schubel (1993) [South Asia].
27. For surveys of early accounts on the Muharram rituals, see Calmard (1996) and Momen (1985: 114–19).
  28. The Karbala accounts are derived largely from accounts written between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when Iran became officially Shia under Safavid rule and lamentation for Imam Husseyn took on a nationalistic flavour, underlining the Persian Shi'i sense of community versus its Sunni Arab neighbours.
  29. The re-enactment of the Karbala narratives in Shi'a Islam broadly reminds of the Stations of the Cross in Christianity.
  30. Pinault (1992: 56–7) views the processions as merely a means to weep for a historical event, designating them as “rites of penitence” to make up for the failure of the Kufans, who had asked Imam Husseyn to come as their leader, but failed to help him in the ensuing battle when Imam Husseyn was martyred.
  31. Some regard sacrifice in front of an emblem akin to idolatry; others say it is forbidden for hygienic reasons.
  32. This reminds of the Holy Communion where bread is said to be or to represent the body of Christ.
  33. See Bloch (1986), Bloch and Parry (1989), Combs-Schilling (1989), Delaney (1986, 1998), Jay (1981, 1992) and Valeri (1985).
  34. The linkage of biological and social reproduction in anthropology is similar to the ideas derived from Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963) on structural parallels between different spheres of life as metaphoric transformations of each other. For a fuller discussion, see Loizos and Heady (1999: 1–19).
  35. The idea that there are systematic relations between different myths was put forward by Lévi-Strauss, Claude (1963).
  36. See Fischer and Abedi (1990: 166–68), Eickelman (1998: 260–64) and Antoun (1989: 171–82).
  37. See, for instance, Combs-Schilling (1989), Delaney (1998), Jay (1992) and Valerie (1985 113 ff).
  38. See Bonte et al.'s (1999) collection of both female and male sacrificial practices in Islamic contexts. See also R. Tapper and N. Tapper (1986: 67) on sacrificial meals among the Durrani Pashtuns as part of vows (*nazr*).
  39. There is a semantic link between the Arabic root for “sacrifice” (*qurbani*, *q-r-b*), which means “proximity”, and the root for “seeking intercession” (*tavassol*, *v-s-l*), which means to “unite” as distinct from brokerage (*dalal-i*) in the secular market.
  40. See Fn. 23 above.
  41. See above for Marilyn Strathern's definition of gender (1988: ix).
  42. To adopt a phrase from Marilyn Strathern (1988: 12–13, 333), women are here the enabling cause for men to be men in performances that bring together disparate persons to create an image of unitary maleness.
  43. On creating a unitary identity for making political claims, see cf. Butler (1993: 227–30) and Strathern (1988: 158–59) regarding the creation of collective identities as spheres of political agency in Melanesian ceremonial exchanges.



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# Chapter 11

## Black American Women and the Gift of Embodied Spirituality

Stephanie Y. Mitchem

### Introduction

This essay will focus on the gift of black American women's embodied spirituality with its strengths and weaknesses. Before I undertake this task, however, several defining frames must be set in order to give the discussion its proper depth and context. The opening definitions are necessary to get to the heart of the discussion, which is embodied spirituality. Black women's embodied spirituality is complex because it reflects varied social contexts of different groups. It is, like other spiritualities, layered with the different cultures of different women. It can be a spirituality that points toward more wholesome futures, and it is in this context that I intend to explore the implications of this special gift.

### Defining Terms

Today, the term "black women" is a problematic term. There is no such unified group – "black women" – to be claimed by any one modern nation. The work of defining the term, to become more precise, is ongoing. So, while I speak from the perspectives of a woman of African descent in the United States, there are scholarly conversations taking place globally among women who are black. New links with sharper contrasts are being defined more clearly through these conversations. The end of this research path is not in sight; therefore, scholars continue to struggle with refining the descriptive terminology of "black women."

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Additionally, in this essay, I will use the terms “African American” and “black American” interchangeably, recognizing that either term has embedded shortcomings, sometimes creating essentialized categories, sometimes denying differences regionally or internationally. Unless otherwise specified, I am using the terms in reference to black people in the United States. The need for more precise terminology is a challenge.

The struggles for precise language indicate the inherited scholarship through which black people, transported from African shores, were crafted into “negroes” who were then legally and socially declared less than human by their European brothers and sisters. After centuries of colonization, enslavement, and underdevelopment, the many black peoples who were (and sometimes still are) oppressed have worked to craft their own spaces, names, and identities. The terms have shifted over the past century, as different groups emphasize one or another aspect of black realities. These processes of self-definition are significant because they/we are doing the “crafting” ourselves even if it is against the background of colonization and marginalization. Today they/we still work from a place that is constructed differently than that of mainstream Western society. My fascination with this place-that-is-no-place has shaped my identity as a scholar.

Theology, as one of the areas in religious studies, is the disciplinary focus through which I work. The fields of religious studies are naturally inter- and cross-disciplinary because religion happens throughout humans’ lives, shaping who we are as individuals, our most intimate institutions, and our structures of society. From the fifteenth century, white, elite males have dominated much of Western European religious scholarship, and such practices were continued in the United States. From approximately the middle of the twentieth century, however, that dominance has been challenged as women and people of color around the globe found formal avenues through which to question and then restate those religious meanings in their own terms. Black liberation theology began in the United States in the middle 1960s, and womanist theology developed from it in the mid-1980s. Womanist theology is a black and feminist liberation theology in which black women are placed at the center rather than on the periphery of scholarship. The gradual inclusion of black and womanist scholars’ thought was part of larger shifts across academic disciplines, as canons were deconstructed and new meanings put forth. Black women’s embodied spirituality is one dimension for exploring new meanings.

## **Setting Contexts of Black Women’s Embodied Spirituality**

The gift of embodied spirituality revolves around the ability of those women who believe in God to deal with their own fears while living their dreams. Dealing with fears and living dreams are needs for all human beings. We each work through fears and toward dreams that will be shaped by the socially constructed categories of race, class, and gender at a minimum. Black Americans are people who have been through so much; yet, has the time passed to consider oppressions in terms of

African Americans? Some believe that black Americans are their own worst enemy, acting in ways that are self-destructive. Some thinkers try to explain such self-negating behaviors with the term “internalized oppression” – that is, personal and sometimes communal adoption of negative ideas that come from racist and anti-black ideologies. In my research, I have come to appreciate the sophistication of the analyses of internalizing oppression.

“Internalized oppression,” however, is too simple a phrase. The relationships between being black in America and learning to adopt higher self-esteem and self-loving attitudes are much more complicated. The term *hegemony* provides a better lens for analyzing the sets of relationships these questions raise. Hegemony, as pointed out by Omi and Winant (1994), is:

a form of rule that operates by constructing its subjects and incorporating contestation.... Under hegemonic conditions, opposition and difference are not repressed, excluded, or silenced (at least not primarily).... Hegemony involves a splitting or doubling of opposition, which simultaneously wins and loses, gains entrance into the halls of power and is co-opted, ‘crosses over’ into mainstream culture and is deprived of its critical content. (113)

Omi and Winant’s definition points out the reality that it is not just black Americans “internalizing” racism that is the problem. Structures are such that black Americans are never fully incorporated into society: a black president, for example, does not erase problems of poverty, hunger, or limited educational opportunities for many others. Yet hegemony sets up false categories of social success and failure, blaming the victims with the following flawed argument: slavery ended in the 1880s, so if black people have not achieved anything, it must be their own fault. Ultimately, as Omi and Winant state, most people of color get played against each other in multiple ways to survive in a social world over which they have minimal control. Financially successful black Americans may be given as examples of possibility, but for those who are black and poor in the United States, many possibilities are foreclosed by equal parts of race prejudice and limits in education, income, and social capital. Hegemony is effective as other poor people of color, particularly brown immigrants such as Latino/Latinas, are thrown into that same arena to compete for money and resources.

Womanist ethicist Emilie Townes (2006) discusses the cultural production of evil and how it is closely tied to the concept of hegemony:

Hegemony is the set of ideas that dominant groups employ in a society to secure the consent of subordinates to abide by their rule. The notion of consent is key, because hegemony is created through coercion that is gained by using the church, family, media, political parties, schools, unions and other voluntary associations.... This breeds a kind of false consciousness ... that creates societal values and moralities such that there is *one* coherent and accurate viewpoint on the world. (20)

Townes then analyzes evil “as a cultural production [that] highlights the systematic construction of truncated narratives designed to support and perpetuate structural inequities (Townes, 4).” She demonstrates how truncated historically crafted narratives of black people, such as Sapphire or Aunt Jemima, continue to perpetuate structural inequities today.



These narratives of black women were powerful because they were always in contrast to the bodies of white women. The contrast of black women's and white women's bodies has persisted over centuries informed by ideas of what is beautiful and what is not. As Daniels stated: "In the construction of the 'black' female body, a 'white' female has been purified by a 'black' or other, Self. Although both bodies, as women, were constructed as 'other' within larger patriarchal discourses that rendered the status of each through structural negation, the 'black female' has been conscripted to the female form as an attribute or an aberration—as an othered 'other'" (62).

The exclusion, invisibility, and negation of African-hued femaleness were not just theories, but concretized in black women's bodily experiences: sexually, grotesquely objectified; expected laborers; deemed sly but not intelligent. These images easily were transferred into the black "welfare queen" or the libidinous "teen mother." These images also created climates wherein exploitation of black women's bodies was normalized by black and white Americans.

Experiences such as these provide contexts that shape the responses that African American women have to negative situations. A response of anger is not unusual. The black feminist Audre Lorde spoke eloquently of anger as a response. "My response to racism is anger. I have lived with that anger, ignoring it, feeding upon it, learning to use it before it laid my visions to waste, for most of my life. Once I did it in silence, afraid of the weight. My fear of anger taught me nothing" (Lorde 1984, 124). To deal with anger, sorrow, frustration, depression, denial, or any of the myriad responses to injustice becomes a spiritual quest that is embodied, a fire that tests black women's mettle everyday.

In light of the above discussion, what does it mean to live as African American women in the United States today? The answer is not one but many, complicated many times over with remnants of history in the middle of current social realities that point toward future prospects. In 1928, writer and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston wrote in this way about lived complications of race: "I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all.... I have seen what the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation (1979, 153)." This statement was not a denial of the impact of race or gender; it was recognition that life went on and strength was needed. Race, Hurston wrote, still played a part: "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background (Hurston 154)." Many black women deal with being thrown against a white background with its perceptions of black people, the many shapes of hegemony, under- or unemployment, and the care of families and self in a hostile world.

The erasure of black women's experiences is also an ongoing problem. This is highlighted as the victims of violence through the state, the police, or other forms of structured racism are generally identified as male. The names of Trayvon Martin (a 17-year-old fatally shot in Florida in 2012 by a gunman under a "stand your ground" law) or Tamir Rice (a 12-year-old boy fatally shot in 2014 in Ohio by a police officer) are more readily recognizable than black girls and women who have suffered state-sponsored violence. The #sayhername project (<http://www.aapf.org/sayhername/>)

was established through the African American Policy Forum in 2015. The project works to keep the names and stories of these women who were victims in the public minds.

Throughout the history of the United States, with or without governmental support and wider societal recognition of differences, African Americans have continued to focus attention and handle events in culturally specific ways. The sayhername project is one example. The Black Lives Matter movement also began through the work of black women activists. Both these are examples of black women's use of new media such as blogs and twitter.

This use of personal and communal agency likewise includes the development of an embodied spirituality. At the core of this spirituality is a rock solid consciousness that human life is interconnected – person to person, across communities, and in tune with nature – and that all is in relationship. This underlying sense of relationality embraces all humans – the living, deceased, and unborn – with nature and the Divine. These relationships have a compelling reality that demands honor and action. It is in response to this demand that, in spite of chronic, persistent experiences of invisibility, isolation, and rejection that create many contemporary crises, African American women draw on embodied spirituality. This shapes the world in which black women operate. This shapes the conditions through which black women scholars come to explore the gift of embodied spirituality within the context of womanist theology.

## Womanist Theology

Womanist theology began in the United States as black American women who were scholars of religion recognized the shortcomings of feminist liberation theology, dominated at that time by white middle-class women, and of black American liberation theology, dominated by black American men. From a few books on black women's religious meanings in the United States in the 1980s to new resources that reach across national lines, more and more black women are participating in the construction of their own religious scholarship.

The writer-activist Alice Walker coined the word “womanist” in 1983, using a four-part definition in poetic language that drew on black expressions (1983, xi–xii). She employed words such as “acting grown up” and being “serious” about loving women, men, food, and self. Walker's definition engaged the imaginations of those who came to name themselves “womanist” theologians. Her definition set out some frameworks in which thinkers could both deconstruct the limits of black liberation and feminist theologies as well as raise up, construct, or critique dimensions of black American women's religious thought. Subsequently, womanist theologians and ethicists analyzed the conditions of black women's lives as central figures in the theological enterprise. The distinctive centering of black women's lives was also accompanied by distinctive methodologies. New questions were asked of religious meaning, beginning with ethical analyses that explored what is unique about African

American women's lives. When disparities were recognized between black women and other segments of society, historical and contemporary black women's values could be brought to the forefront, raising questions such as: how have these values improved the quality of the women's lives? Where is sin or salvation found in their experiences? What does it mean to be a black woman, to be a sexual being, to live in holiness? How might the image of the Divine or the meaning of prayer change in their understandings? Both politics and culture are part of these theological and ethical explorations.

Womanist theology has developed since the mid-1980s; therefore, it is not what it was two decades ago. Stacey Floyd-Thomas, a womanist ethicist, traces the paths of development, discussing how womanist thinkers have been in dialogue across disciplines and cultures and nations, embracing a variety of perspectives. (Floyd-Thomas 2006) "Womanism is a movement with multiple voices, cultures, and experiences, rather than a school or a canon that prefers one voice, culture, or experience of 'woman' or of 'the Black woman' over others (2006, 7)." Floyd-Thomas considers that this communitarian movement of black women has led to an evolution of Alice Walker's original four-part description. Floyd-Thomas outlines her own five-part understanding of womanism, where the first four retain similar language and are somewhat related to Walker's definition. The fifth part, however, is taken directly from women's shared dialogues. Floyd-Thomas names these five parts: radical subjectivity, traditional communalism, redemptive self-love, critical engagement, and appropriation and reciprocity.

## Black Women and Embodied Spirituality

Such theological explorations over the past decades have led to the naming of black women's embodied spirituality. An awareness of the recent shape of this spirituality is based in recognition that such fleshed-spirituality has informed the choices, experiences, and lives of historical black women.

As one example, womanist theologian Jacquelyn Grant identified the impact of spirituality in the story of the escaped slave Harriet Tubman who would return to help many other slaves escape. Tubman reflected on the moment of decision:

I looked at my hands, to see if I was the same person now I was free. There was such a glory over everything, the sun came like gold through the trees, and over the field, and I felt like I was in heaven.... To this solemn resolution I came; I was free and they should be free also; I would bring them all here. Oh, how I prayed then, lying all alone on the cold, damp ground. (Grant 1995, 129)

Human interconnections, relationality with the Divine, and the compelling obligation to act are all seen in this one brief excerpt.

While Tubman's experience was centuries away from those of African American women today, embodied spirituality has been retained over time because of real conditions of black women's lives. Most moments are not as dramatic as the one in

Tubman's story; yet it is the chronic, persistent experiences of invisibility, isolation, and rejection that create contemporary crises wherein African American women draw on embodied spirituality.

Embodied spirituality continues to inform and shape many African American women's lives. Coined and developed by womanist theologians and ethicists (See especially Townes 1995), the term deliberately draws on the real-life experiences of African American women, imperative to the methodologies of womanist theology and ethics. The new meanings brought by naming an embodied spirituality force the use of new language or at least reinterpretations of the old.

This spirituality is called embodied because it is demonstrated physically, with a profound sense of connections between body and spirit, rather than a spirituality that occurs on, or is limited to, another plane of existence. One's physical body, soul, spirit, and consciousness are viewed as integrated. Therefore, spirituality is not discrete, invisible, or intangible, but made visible on this plane by actions in life. Spirituality serves as both connective tissue and integrative catalyst throughout life. The weave of this spiritual view incorporates God or the Divine as part of the set of connections. Therefore, it is not unusual to hear one black person talk about angels she has met and another to mention what God personally revealed. This kind of spirituality is not necessarily bound to a particular denomination or confession but has distinctive connections to the cultures of black people. Because it is shaped by these cultures, there will be differences between regional expressions of black spirituality.

Embodied spirituality draws on culturally grounded ideas as discussed above to construct both survival and quality of life strategies. This somewhat expands on womanist theologian Delores Williams (1993) discussion of "survival/quality of life." "Many black women have testified that 'God helped them make a way out of no way.' ... The female-centered tradition of African biblical appropriation could be named the *survival/quality of life* tradition (5–6)." The "way out of no way" is necessary over the span of life as oppressive realities seek to enclose black women into limiting and narrow boxes; embodied spirituality can open the way to redemptive possibilities.

Embodied spirituality is based on religio-cultural concepts and thereby demonstrates one level of black American continuity with conceptual frameworks from the African continent. The idea of these connections sometimes seems so fabricated; after all, African Americans have long been away from African shores. Yet, some years ago, anthropologists Sidney Mintz and Richard Price (1976) used the term "African cognitive orientations (10)," to name these cultural continuities that represent the different forms of epistemology with which black Americans may view life. Africans in America have retained some form of culturally grounded cognitive orientations in diverse ways and some are specific to black women. Studies continue to explore ways that the African Diaspora provides connections between black people around the world. Sylvia Ardyn Boone (1986), for instance, researched concepts of feminine beauty among the Mende people in Sierra Leone. Linda E. Thomas (1999) has extensively researched spiritual concepts and their applications in a South African village with particular attention to women. These are only two of the

significant studies that have named African and African American knowledge and experience in new ways, as black people have applied scholarly tools to name who we are by defining our own meanings.

These religious meanings are organic, transmitted through communities and families. It is particularly through the studies of Black Diaspora and processes of religious transmission that such paths become clearer. Dianne Stewart's (2005) powerful study of the African roots of Jamaican religious traditions identified one foundation for her approach to religion and to research. "My mother, the source of my grounding and trust in the power of the Divine, was never orthodox enough to promote my captivity to racist, anti-African and sexist Eurocentric doctrines about God, humanity, and the religious life. Nor did she remotely imply that my Blackness and femaleness were shameful things.... My mother valued her mother's spiritual intelligence" (xii).

Embodied spirituality is thus part of a cultural heritage that defines the human person as an integrated body and soul in intimate relationship with other humans – including those unborn or deceased – with nature, and with God. This is spirituality is beyond any particular denomination or creed as Stewart's excerpt indicated. When there is commitment to a religious tradition, embodied spirituality serves as a framework that many black women carry into their church pews and bring into conversation with their denominational affiliations. Therefore, worship times on Sundays or Saturdays are informed by this spirituality through understanding sets of interwoven relationships that can lead to experiences of joy and, for a moment, peace.

Yet, too often the richness of black women's spiritual lives is reduced to fodder for comedy programs, shown as silly, uncontrolled, with exaggerated movements. A general lack of recognition of the power of embodied spirituality reduces it to cultural quirks that can be ignored. Yet, recognized or not, this spirituality is foundational for other aspects of black religious life. There have been hundreds of black women bringing music into churches and bringing worship experiences alive.

In such ways, black women's spirituality has influenced the prayer lives of existing churches both in mainline denominations and historical black churches. Two examples demonstrate this point. Sister Rosetta Tharpe (1915–1973) used music in new ways of worshipping in the Church of God in Christ; she influenced the development of gospel music when she performed at venues around the country (Jackson 2004). Koontz (1991) writes that Sister Thea Bowman (1937–2000) led Catholic bishops in song at a 1989 convocation resulting in that staid group of mostly white men standing, singing, and swaying in time to the music. Black women's embodied spirituality may make participation in communal prayers more meaningful, strengthened by incorporating the joy of song and physical movement into ritual and worship.

Embodied spirituality can become a route to rename life's course and assist creativity. It becomes a way to infuse meaning into and to understand the realities of daily life. The view from the Spirit becomes the lens with which to view all aspects of life. However, the spirit and body are not separate: the spirit world is connected with daily life, part of a web of relationships that support, guide, or challenge life

decisions. Everything, from a new job to a child's success, becomes proof of the efficacy of the Spirit. This spirituality invites black women to learn to read "signs" so that a severe storm or a placid lake can bring spiritual messages, resounding with the voice of God. This type of spirituality, therefore, helps black women to interpret real events with different eyes.

Embodied spirituality is thus a potent force in black American women's lives, shaping identities and resisting negative life situations. Women I have interviewed over the past years have helped me to understand the power of this spirituality. One of the women was Quincy who gave her definition of spirituality. "Spirituality I think is a feeling—we got a little bit of the Lord in us and we try to dress it up and make it look good. We go to church, pay our tithes, and Mrs. Jones sings your favorite song and you cry. And you learn how to pray (personal interview, 1997)." This is not a spirituality that is distant from life but is settled in the body, something we "dress up." Prayer coming from such a spirituality engages strong emotions even as it moves toward transcendence.

Another woman interviewed was Mattie who discussed recognition of God's love as a key to self-esteem. This illustrates how embodied spirituality can inform and shape many African American women's lives, not only in the closed confines of churches, but, too often, in the middle of social situations that attempt to limit or negatively define the women. Mattie discussed how the experience of being loved by God is a buffer against loss of self:

What you supposed to do when they tell you you nobody, you supposed to look in the mirror, embrace yourself and say, "Well, maybe you don't love me but God loves me." See, I recently spent a lot of time with myself.... You know I'm not the most educated person in the world, but not all education is found in books. You can have good wisdom and good spirituality for direction. (personal interview, 1997)

In both these women's words, the efficacy of embodied spirituality becomes clear. Through their spirituality, both Mattie and Quincy find ways to find their own identities and voices. They each learned that spirituality is a tool that works in real time in their daily experiences. The gift of an embodied spirituality indeed addresses "survival/quality of life" issues. By embracing this spirituality, they each found ways to cope with loneliness and lack of love, to bring joy into their lives, and to recognize the goodness of their selves.

Not all black women may share these specific ideas. Yet, the intense feeling of connection to a world of spirit is not unusual and may be expressed in a variety of ways. The gift of this kind of spirituality is not neatly applied nor automatically appreciated. Still, embodied spirituality in this form offers moments wherein black women can act as agents on their own behalf.

## The Twist in the Gift

Unfortunately, however, the meanings of this gift can be twisted in a variety of shapes, to the detriment of black women. This embodied gift, like any other, has complex and multiple layered meanings. Who defines the gift? Do black women have control of their own images? Or are their bodies deemed useful things and rendered invisible, even by black communities? Are black women's concerns dismissed in the process? As the black feminist bell hooks stated, "No other group in America has so had their identity socialized out of existence as have black women." (hooks 1981, 7) The comparison of black and white women's bodies, the constructions of physical female beauty, with attendant black stereotypes all are mentioned previously in this essay. These twists are often perceived as deriving from white patriarchal patterns of social control. Yet, black communities also may twist the gifts of black women's embodied spirituality.

African American feminist Luisah Teish is a Yoruba priestess whose search for wholeness with an embodied spirituality is graphically described in the story of her own religious development (Teish 1985). As a younger woman who struggled for the liberation of her community, Teish had worked with different movements such as Black Power and Civil Rights. But she and other black women faced resistance to their ideas within those movements. "The 'brothers' decided what we were to become. We were to be warriors by day, Cleopatra by night, workers and teachers in between. They decided my most important job was to have babies and teach those babies African culture" (29). In this way, Teish's religious explorations and insights, as those of many African American women, were misunderstood and dismissed by others in the community.

Such negative experiences and tensions can also be readily seen in the seemingly perdurable sexism and heterosexism in black communities, running much more deeply than Teish's comment cited above. Michele Wallace penned her now classic *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (Wallace 1980). Among other topics, she explored ways that black women carry an internalized sexist oppression about the black men in their lives:

The American black woman is haunted by the mythology ... based upon the real persecution of black men.... Every time she starts to wonder about her own misery, to think about reconstructing her life, to shake off her devotion and feeling of responsibility to everyone but herself, the ghosts pounce. She is stopped cold. The ghosts talk to her. "You crippled the black man." (30–31)

Wallace's book created a firestorm at the time of its publication. Some black men lashed back. One black male writer argued that Wallace did not take the context of black men into account (Staples 1979). Had she done so, he argued, capitalism or the shortage of black men or the aggressiveness and independence of divorced women – rather than sexism – would be determined the real culprit of the problems (25).

A view of black women as those who always give to others in their communities places particular demands on black women's bodies; sexual activity, therefore, becomes a public and not personal matter as it is a demonstration of generosity.



Therefore, black women's sexuality is too often policed by other members in her community, especially by family and church. In the forever-giving-woman construction, a black woman who decides not to bear children becomes a source of angst for many in black communities. Why would she do that to us? What is wrong with her? But all women should not be mothers and the belief that the only way black women can give back to the community is through birth is ludicrous. In this construction of the forever-giving-woman, black women who are same-gender-loving become another form of confusion for some black communities. Violence against real or perceived black lesbians by black men, including "cure" of the condition by rape, are stories too often swept under community carpets.

Womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas (1999) analyzes the issue of misaligned and damaged gender relationships as part of the problems in black communities and churches. She contends that black communities, in general, continue to be impacted by a legacy of "white sexual assault" with roots in the enslavement of Africans. Douglas calls for a sexual discourse of resistance. Such discourse is both "deconstructive in that it helps Black people to understand the many forces, especially White culture, that have shaped Black sexuality. It is also constructive in that it seeks to provide more life-enhancing views and attitudes concerning black sexuality" (72).

Whether in black or white, these discussions seem so long ago, so twentieth century, and there are those who may wish to push these images into the past. Yet, the same themes continue to be played, sometimes with different rhythms, but they are recognizable.

On one hand, the portrayal of young women in rap videos becomes one sign of the continued debasement of black women's bodies. In 2004, student-led protests at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia, resulted in a rap musician's appearance on campus. William Jelani Cobb (2010) analyzes several aspects of the situations including the link with history: "The sad truth is that hip-hop artists' verbal and visual renderings of black women are now virtually indistinguishable from those of nineteenth century white slave owners. History is full of tragic irony" (210).

On the other hand, it might seem that black women who have been successful are signs that these problems are ending. For example, Michelle Obama is often pointed to as a positive sign of the changes in American society. But one author points out the ambiguity:

Michelle Obama, an accomplished attorney and administrator, embodies [the rise of strong women unwilling to accept ancient stereotypes about female subservience.] In addition, the 'First Lady' historically has served as a symbol of womanhood – as defined by patriarchy.... Comes now Michelle Obama, a first lady in black who challenges the patriarchal stereotype – not to mention the racial construction of the femme ideal – in the midst of chaotic worldwide change and a demographic transformation that is changing the face of the nation. Unsurprisingly, she has become the target of deeply rooted anxiety." (Horne and Horne-Wells 2009, 126)

In the end, no amount of personal will can overcome the systemic inequities – from education to economic wealth to social capital – that become constrictions for many. When I have spoken with groups of African American women, I find that younger

women seem to have more hope in social structures. In contrast, older women are more self-reliant. This difference seems to be on account of their own development into an embodied spirituality, learning to lean on the wisdom of older community members. By embracing this spirituality, these women found ways to cope with loneliness or pain or lack of love, to bring joy into their lives, and to recognize the goodness of their selves.

There is genius in embodied spirituality, but it is too often dismissed as mere emotionalism or some other facet deemed unimportant. Therefore, it seems that there is little possibility of a general acceptance of the depth of this gift. If there is a general pattern of ignoring African American women's ideas, there is an even deeper resistance to recognizing the intellectual content and wisdom of black women's embodied spirituality.

Throughout this essay, I have played back and forth over time frames, showing how black women have been impacted by the limitations their societies place on them over centuries. And it continues. In recent years, there is a new form: limiting the ideas of womanists. One of the ways is particularly insidious: defining womanist theology and its accompanying embodied spirituality as only Christian in nature. Only Christian women do not need to find their voices, to recognize the holiness of their bodies, to express embodied spirituality. Certainly the first black American scholars who coined and used the term womanist theology and ethics were Christian: Rev. Dr. Katie Cannon, Rev. Dr. Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, and Rev. Dr. Emilie Townes. They began in the 1980s – with a term (womanist) coined by self-proclaimed pagan, Alice Walker. But the term fit the common struggles of black women. The initial scholars have invited other black women to join the conversation. These conversations cross religious lines and have taken many turns. Dianne Stewart's *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience* (2005) looks closely at Obeah. Melanie L. Harris has written of womanist humanism (*CrossCurrents* 2007). Debra Majeed has had several essays on a Muslim womanist philosophy; her most recent book is *Intimate Sisterhood: Polygyny in the World of African American Muslims* (University Press of Florida 2015).

And the conversations are not just in the United States. In 2012, I participated in a conference held in Legon, Ghana, at the institute founded by Dr. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, which is the Talitha Qumi Centre, Trinity Theological Centre. The conference was generally considered a coming together of African and African Diasporic Women in Religion and Theology. A range of black women who are Muslim, Christian, or African traditionalist participated. The theme that year was "Hope is as Strong as a Women's Arm, Mobilizing Amidst Violence Against Women and Girls." The realities of violence against black women's bodies and the spirituality needed to make significant changes are not limited to one religion.

Katie Cannon, who was an initiator of womanist ethics and theology, wrote of the resistance on the part of the scholars and publishers to recognize the breadth of black women's writing and the importance of womanist thought. She termed it "structured academic amnesia." By ignoring recent developments, by putting some

kind of essentializing borders around women's intellectual endeavors, the erasure of black women's ongoing contributions is affected. Or, as Cannon stated:

Whenever the academy fails to take seriously valid bodies of knowledge produced by the intersection of race, sex, and class; whenever the academy desires to systematically classify the inner working of our embodied mining of the motherlode as questionable fool's gold; whenever the masterminds of intellectual imperialism encode our candid perceptions and scholarly labor as nothing more than culturally laden idiosyncrasies, then we end up with education that is unbalanced, knowledge that is incomplete, and a worldview that is distorted. (Cannon 2006, 27)

## Conclusion

The gift of black women's embodied spirituality is distinctive and arcs over time and place, as has been stated in multiple ways throughout this essay. There is a sense of an integral, holistic relationship between body and spirit; therefore, life, in this view, is not short, brutish, or nasty. The sense of interconnection also extends between other humans. This awareness of interrelationships fosters a greater sense of community as bonded and reciprocal instead of separate and competing. A good of society is thus founded on nurturing others rather than testing their ability to survive. With this sense of embodiment, education becomes an act of love rather than of control. Here, the purpose of learning is for the good of the wider community.

The sometimes-parodied joy and exuberance of black women's embodied spirituality could help to redefine beauty. Creativity would become valued and mutuality prized in a society formed with such spirituality. Human dignity would not be accidental or earned, but based on the very value of life, the ability to make decisions based on self-reflection and true gift would be much more prized – leaving room for new discoveries from the depths of the human heart.

Perhaps, ultimately, black women's gift of embodied spirituality should be appreciated as participating in the sacred, by whatever name. Perhaps there is holy mystery shared with other "Othered" groups who identify their sorrows as strengthening with their own lives and as deepening their own humanity. Conversely, the oppressors are weakened and made less human by their own actions, to be viewed as the monstrosities and nightmares by future generations when hindsight becomes clearer vision. Perhaps ultimately the gift of embodied spirituality, sustaining generations, will make the most valuable contribution to the future, when new forms of being human together can be dreamed into reality.

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## Chapter 12

# Women and the Gift in Medieval South India

Leslie C. Orr

The act of giving – termed *dāna* in Sanskrit – is of great significance for all the religious traditions of India. Typically bestowed upon a “worthy”, rather than a needy, recipient, the gift serves as an expression of selflessness and a gesture of reverence. Thus, a gift carries with it religious meanings that transcend the various pragmatic functions of providing support for a Brahman, ascetic or guru, of sponsoring worship activities, or of bringing about a marriage through the gift of a daughter (*kanyādāna*).<sup>1</sup> The importance of donation in the Indian religious context is indicated by the existence of many thousands of records of gifts inscribed on copper plates or on stone, which carefully describe for posterity the donor, the recipient, the substance and the object of the gift. Sometimes such records make explicit reference to the merit that is produced by the gift, for the donor or others, and to its character as *dharma* – that is, an act of righteousness or religious duty. Frequently an inscription details the spiritual rewards that will accrue to those who, in coming generations, ensure the maintenance of the terms of the gift. Alternatively, it can describe the forms of degradation and damnation to be visited on those who prevent Brahmins or monks from continuing to enjoy the lands they have been granted or who obstruct the conduct of the worship service that the donor intended to be carried out “as long as the sun and the moon shall shine”.

In this essay, I will be basing my analysis on an examination of the records of gifts that were engraved in stone during the early medieval period (700–1300 CE) in what is today the state of Tamil Nadu, in South India. There are approximately 15,000 of these inscriptions, many of which are found on the walls of Hindu and Jain temples that are still in use. These records usually represent religious giving as an interaction between an individual and a religious institution or, more precisely, between an individual and a deity (or Jain Tīrthankara or Buddha) enshrined in a specific location. This kind of giving can be contrasted with the forms of *dāna*

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described in copper-plate inscriptions, in religious literature and in recent anthropological analyses, in which gifts are bestowed upon other human beings – for example, Brahmans, renunciants or in-laws. The stone inscriptions can tell us many things – how worship was conducted and how objects of worship were conceptualized or how sovereignty, religious authority and social status were defined – but here I propose to focus on what these records of gifts reveal about the roles and images of women, and conceptions of women and the gift, in medieval South India. I am concerned, therefore, not only with the activities of women as donors, which are widely attested in the inscriptions, but with the various ways in which the inscriptions also represent women as objects to be given – and more broadly, taking as a point of departure Lévi-Strauss’ formulation of the function of women given in marriage, how women (and feminine figures and powers) are represented as tokens of exchange and instruments to be utilized by men.<sup>2</sup> Such notions of woman as gift are clearly evident in historical Indian materials, particularly in religious texts and technical literature (e.g. ritual and legal treatises) in what we might call “scriptural” contexts.<sup>3</sup>

In India’s classical traditions, the giving of women and the instrumentality of the feminine are represented in three overlapping fields of discourse. First is the socio-legal field, concerned with such issues as women’s place in the family structure, their property rights and their social and economic autonomy. The *locus classicus* for this field of discourse is the corpus of texts known as the Dharmasāstras (treatises on *dharma*), the most well known of which is the *Manusmṛiti* (the so-called Laws of Manu). A second discursive field is the royal field, which is also described in the Dharmasāstras, as well as in the *Arthaśāstra* and the Epics (the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyana*), but derives equally from conceptions of kingship expressed in courtly and bardic literature. The relationships that the king has with women – whether he plays a dharmic, heroic or erotic role – are of considerable interest to our understanding of women and the gift. Finally, the third field to be distinguished is the ritual-symbolic field, in which feminine qualities and powers are in various ways embodied, channelled or bestowed. Many of the concepts that belong to this field are enunciated in the sectarian literature known as the Purāṇas and Āgamas, which may be loosely described as mythological and ritual/doctrinal texts, respectively. Within the ritual-symbolic discursive field, I will be concerned with what are regarded as the feminine qualities and forces of auspiciousness and *śakti* (“power”), and with female divinity, as well as the place of women in ritual.

If these three fields of discourse frequently present themselves in scriptural sources in the guise of fixed and formal systems, the stone inscriptions that serve as the foundation for my investigation provide concrete instances of their deployment within the practical world of deeds and represent the multiplicity and malleability of conceptions and behaviours that the scriptural traditions are concerned with. In order to discover what the inscriptions have to tell us about women and the gift with reference to the three discursive fields, I will focus my attention on the records found at seven particular temples, located in various towns and villages in the central and northern parts of Tamil Nadu. I have chosen these temples because they represent a range of local conditions, because they all contain a substantial number

of inscriptions and because at each of them, women were active as donors. I have examined all the published and unpublished inscriptions from these temples, a total of 882 inscriptions, that date from the period of the eighth through thirteenth centuries – what can be called the Chola period, although the limits of this time frame stretch before and after the period when the Chola kings were dominant in this region.<sup>4</sup>

The northernmost temple town in the study, Tiruvannamalai, is in North Arcot district, in a dry zone; the temple here is dedicated to the god Śiva and lies at the foot of a great hill. Today this is a huge temple complex, of the classic South Indian type, surrounded by a series of enclosing walls surmounted by towers over the entrances, filled with numerous pavilions and subsidiary shrines. For much of the Chola period, however, the temple consisted only of a small central shrine within a walled compound. A very large number of inscriptions from both the early and later periods have been preserved on the temple walls here; 283, or close to a third of all the inscriptions in the present study, are from Tiruvannamalai.<sup>5</sup> Twenty-five miles to the south is the town of Tirukkoyilur, on the southern bank of the Pennai river, where there is a temple dedicated to Viṣṇu, and in the hamlet of Kilur, a temple dedicated to Śiva. Both are shrines of great antiquity and sanctity, although the Śiva temple at Kilur is the older of the two structures, and most of its inscriptions date from the late tenth and early eleventh centuries.<sup>6</sup> The inscriptions on the walls of Tirukkoyilur's Viṣṇu temple date for the most part from the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and of the seven temples studied, this is the one where there is the least evidence of women's patronage: only 10 % of the gifts recorded were made by female donors.<sup>7</sup> Further to the south, in a green and well-irrigated part of South Arcot district, is the village of Udaiyargudi (also known as Kattumannargudi), site of a Śiva temple that preserves the relatively small and simple architectural plan of the early Chola period. Most of the inscriptions from this temple date from the late tenth century.<sup>8</sup> Two of the temple towns – Tiruvidaimarudur<sup>9</sup> and Tiruvisalur<sup>10</sup> – are located in Thanjavur district, in the fertile rice-growing area of the delta of the Kaveri River. The temples at both of these places are dedicated to Śiva and are known as sacred sites from an early period. Most of the inscriptions here date from the tenth to the early twelfth centuries. At Tiruvisalur, women are especially prominent as donors; their gifts constitute over a third of those received by the temple. About sixty miles to the southwest, in the dry and rocky region of Tiruchirappalli district formerly known as the Pudukkottai State, is Kudumiyamalai. Here there is another shrine of considerable antiquity dedicated to Śiva, and here, too, there are a large number of inscriptions dating from the tenth century, but also a number from the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries.<sup>11</sup>

Although the stone inscriptions are multivocalic in their formulation of patterns of giving, taking and possessing, the gift that is described in these sources is primarily the gift from an individual to the deity who is the Lord of a particular place. And "taking" (*koṇṭu*) is most often portrayed as a deed performed by temple authorities who acted on behalf of this deity or by local residents who took charge of donations made to the temple. The phrase often used in the inscriptions for the receiving of a gift by the temple authorities is *kaikkōṇṭu* – "taking in hand" – a necessary



completion of the act of giving, since for a gift to have significance as *dāna*, to be productive of religious merit for the donor, there must be a recipient (Sontheimer 1964).

The inscriptions engraved on the walls of these seven temples – like those elsewhere in the Tamil country – are constituted primarily as legal documents, recording the details of property transactions and agreements among various actors, including donors and village and temple authorities. In addition to the “business” part of the inscription, a number of the medieval Tamil inscriptions commence with a *meykkīrtti*, the poetic, if rather formulaic, description of the exploits and attainments of the ruling king. From the later part of the reign of the Chola king Rajaraja I, in the early eleventh century, *meykkīrttis* became a relatively common feature of stone inscriptions. Close to 20% of the inscriptions engraved after 1000 CE at the seven temples studied here commence with a *meykkīrtti*, and the proportion is over 50% during the eleventh century. Although it might grow over time, the *meykkīrtti* for each king – the Chola ruler or, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the monarch of the increasingly dominant Pandya dynasty – was fairly standard, standing at the beginning of the inscription and leading into the date of the record, expressed in terms of the king’s regnal year (Orr 2006; Francis and Schmid 2010).

## The Sociolegal Field of Discourse

When reading the stone inscriptions for insight into women’s relationships with the gift, it is in the main body of the record, rather than the *meykkīrtti*, where there is the most explicit material – material relating to the sociolegal context. In contrast to the Dharmaśāstras’ restrictions on women’s rights to property and these texts’ enunciation of women’s dependent status, there is abundant evidence in the medieval Tamil inscriptions of extensive and autonomous gift giving by women.

The Dharmaśāstras – in outlining ideal patterns of marriage, rights to property, inheritance and familial authority – have a good deal to say about women’s status as gift and women’s capacity as giver. Several of the authors of and commentators on the Dharmaśāstra literature maintain that a married woman loses her status as a member of her natal family and is subsumed into her husband’s identity; certainly her husband has primacy in bestowing identity upon and in having “possession” of a woman’s offspring (Kane 1930–62, II: 466–67). As for women’s property (*strīdhana*), this consists essentially of gifts bestowed by her husband at or after the time of her marriage or by her brother, mother or father. She may in fact have little claim to the “dowry” she brings with her to her husband’s home or receive any inheritance from her natal family, according to many of the authors of the Dharmaśāstras. Nonetheless, as Patrick Olivelle (2004) has pointed out, the Dharmaśāstras’ many injunctions related to the wealth of unmarried women, wives and widows reflect a reality in which women actually could possess property and have agency in economic matters. But the “official” position on women’s lack of personal property, combined with the absence of an autonomous identity for women,

results in the Dharmaśāstras' judgement that women may not initiate or act as sponsors of religious rituals. According to the *Manusmṛti*, "there is no separate yajña [sacrificial ritual] for women (independently of the husband) nor vrata (vows) nor fasts (without his consent)" (Manu 5.155, trans. Kane 1930–1962, II: 558–59). And in the Āgamas, even the role of women as almsgivers is treated with suspicion, while the possibility that the patron of temple building and temple ritual might be a woman is scarcely entertained (Orr 1993).

The medieval Tamil inscriptions provide an alternative perspective, in which the circumscription of women's roles laid out in the ritual and legal treatises is little in evidence. At the seven temples under review – and particularly in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries – there are numerous records of the gifts made by queens, palace women, Brahman women, temple women, female members of local chiefly families and the wives of landowners and merchants. At Tiruvisalur, Kilur and Udaiyargudi, where most of the inscriptions date from the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, between a fifth and a third of all donors were female. Of the 348 records of gifts made at all seven temples in the 250 years between 800 and 1050 CE, 25 % were made by women. But starting in the mid-eleventh century, the visibility of women as donors declines, so that in the following 250-year period (1050–1300), women's donations constitute just 14 % of the total of 289 gifts.<sup>12</sup> The records of women's gifts at the seven temples consistently refer to women as autonomous agents, capable of acquiring, possessing and alienating property without permission or interference from others.<sup>13</sup> The manner in which women's gifts were made and recorded, and the substance and the object of their gifts, parallels what is found in the inscriptions recording the gifts of men (Orr 2007b). Women, like men, donated livestock, gold or land to the temple deity in order to sponsor the production of images and the building of shrines; the bathing and adorning of images; arrangements for offerings of lamps, food and flowers; and the employment of service personnel. There is every reason to believe that the patronage of temples, as this is recorded in the inscriptions, represents only a tiny fraction of women's donative activity. Some forms of religious giving in medieval South India, which would have remained undocumented, were no doubt dominated by women – notably, the offering of alms to monks or ascetics who begged from house to house.<sup>14</sup>

Not only did many women have access to wealth which allowed them to make gifts, but there is scant evidence that they themselves were regarded as gifts – as entities bestowed upon their husbands on the occasion of marriage. The ways in which women are described in the inscriptions show clearly that they were not identified exclusively, or even primarily, as wives and that they continued after marriage to have claims on the status and property of their natal families.<sup>15</sup> It may be argued that for a woman to retain her identity as her father's daughter after her marriage – as did, for example, many Chola queens and princesses – is in fact an indication of her status as an instrument of exchange that she was simply a pawn in the creation of political alliances among men. However, the way in which the inscriptions describe the women who figure in such marriage alliances actually sends quite a different message. These women, who are very often identified both as daughters and as wives, are referred to with elevated titles and honorific language and appear

as major actors in the sponsorship of substantial gifts to temples, in which they clearly acted in their own name and with their own motives (Trautmann 1981; Spencer 1983; Kaimal 2002–3; Francis 2009, 479–83; Schmid 2014a, 201–48; Cane 2016; Orr 2016). In a record from Tiruvidaimarudur, for example, Nampirāṭṭiyār (“our great queen”) Sṛīpañcavaṇmāteviyār – a woman who is evidently one of the queens of Rajaraja I – is said to have come to worship the god of this place and have visited the temple’s flower garden, to have made an endowment to support the men who cultivated the garden and supplied flowers for worship in the temple (SII 13.133).

References in the *meykkīrtti*s to queens seated beside the reigning king depict them as individuals whose status was not wholly defined with reference to their royal husbands, but as women whose nobility and praiseworthy qualities were their own. For example, the *meykkīrtti* of a twelfth-century inscription from Tiruvidaimarudur (SII 5.702) describes Vikrama Chola’s queens:

Mūkkōkkiḷāṇaṭi of the forest-country, who came into being in order to be worshipped by the seven ancient worlds, dwelt in harmony with him, just as Śaṅkara dwells with Umā in the Himalayas; and, like Gaṅgā in whom Śiva rejoices, Tiyākapaṭākai, the ornament of women, with wavy hair, of refined qualities, the mistress of the three worlds, dwelt in harmony with him, wholly possessing his heart.

In the *meykkīrtti* of a thirteenth-century record from Kudumiyamalai (IPS 290), Sundara Pandya’s queen is said to be:

seated along with him ... the queen Uḷakamuḷutuṭaiyāl [“the mistress of the whole world”] who is honored by the virtuous and beautiful ladies of the kings of the North, whose troupes of elephants trumpeted like the ocean.

In these poetic portraits of queens, their illustrious character and independent sovereignty are celebrated. They are not mere wives, but are said to resemble goddesses (Francis and Schmid 2010; Cox forthcoming).

Marriage is not represented anywhere in the inscriptions as an institution or a process that made women into objects to be possessed or given (Orr 2014). But there is a category of women who are encountered in the inscriptions who did have this status. These are slave women. In the whole corpus of Chola period inscriptions, I have found 22 records that refer to slaves. None of them come from the seven temples examined in this study, most date from the thirteenth century, and all but one are concerned with female slaves who were given – or, more often, sold – to the temple. Gifts of slave women constitute a miniscule proportion of the donations that were made to temples. This contrasts with an idiom of religious giving that surfaces in inscriptions from twelfth- and thirteenth-century Bengal and Orissa, which extol kings who are said to have donated hundreds of women to temples.<sup>16</sup> Not only do such images – exaggerated as they may be – provide a very different picture of the milieu of the temple from that found in the inscriptions of medieval South India, but they also point toward a different conception of the involvement of the king with women and the gift. We turn, therefore, to a consideration of the royal field of discourse.

## The Royal Field of Discourse

In the Chola period inscriptions that refer to slave women, the king is scarcely present. The rulers of medieval Tamil Nadu did not donate women to the temple. In fact, the rulers of medieval Tamil Nadu made very few donations of any kind to temples. In the inscriptions of the seven temples, it is obvious that the gifts of queens were more numerous than those of kings and that queens were active as temple patrons considerably earlier than were kings (Venkataraman 1976; Orr 2001; Orr 2007a; Cane 2016). In the tenth century, it is the queens of chiefly families like the Muttaraiyar and the Vanakovaraiyar who made gifts to the temples at Tiruvannamalai, Kilur and Kudumiyamalai; in later times, queens of the Chola dynasty endowed the temples of Tiruvidaimarudur, Tiruvisalur and Udaiyargudi. Before 1100, there are just a handful of inscriptions recording the gifts of Chola kings at our seven temples. After this date, in the course of the twelfth century, the Chola kings finally emerged as major temple patrons – but only at Tiruvidaimarudur. There are no records at all at Tiruvannamalai or at Tirukkoyilur of the gifts of Chola kings. In the thirteenth century, Tiruvannamalai received generous support from the Kadavarayar king Kopperuncinkatevar and his queens, and Tirukkoyilur enjoyed the special patronage of the Pandya kings (who also made gifts at all of the other of our seven temples – except Tiruvisalur, which has no inscriptions dating from the thirteenth century).

If the king, and particularly the Chola king, was actually less present as a donor than expected, one might look to the *meykkīrtti*s for evidence that there was at least an ideal of royal patronage and protection of temples. In fact, the *meykkīrtti*s that appear in the stone inscriptions at the seven temples (which typically preface records of land sales or records of gifts from nonroyal donors) hardly ever refer to liberality or charity as a virtue of the king. Although there are a few references to the king's support of Brahmans or temples in the Sanskrit eulogies (*praśastis*) that preface the copper-plate inscriptions of the Cholas, the epigraphical evidence simply does not support the notion that conceptions of kingship in the Chola period “emphasized *dāna*, or kingly prestation, as the dominant royal attribute” (Stein 1984, 42). In fact, in the inscriptions engraved at the seven temples, only three eulogies of royal patronage can be discovered – and only one of these concerns the donative activity of a Chola king. The two non-Chola eulogies occur in praise poems engraved on the walls of the temple at Tiruvannamalai in the thirteenth century and celebrate the generous gifts made to that temple, in one case, on the part of the Katavarayar king Kopperuncinkan (TAM 208) and, in the other, on the part of the Vanakovaraiyar chief (TAM 214). Also in the thirteenth century, in an inscription at Kudumiyamalai (IPS 166), there is an exceptionally lengthy *meykkīrtti* praising the conquests of Kulottunga III, intermingled with descriptions of his worship of the god Śiva at Madurai – after his defeat of the Pandyan king whose capital this was. It lists his gifts and construction projects at the temples of Madurai, Chidambaram, Tribhuvanam, Darasuram and Tiruvarur and his establishment of festivals at these temples.<sup>17</sup> Apart from this unusual *meykkīrtti*, the only other mention of the virtue of giving in the *meykkīrtti*s of Chola kings at our seven temples occurs as a passing

reference in the eulogy of Vikrama Chola that prefaces several inscriptions at Tiruvidaimarudur (SII 5.702; SII 5.703; SII 23.287; SII 23.301); here the king is said to uphold *tarumam*, *tānam* and *tavam* (or, in Sanskrit, *dharma*, *dāna* and *tapas*) – religious duty, giving and austerities.

The *meykkīrttis* do not represent these medieval South Indian kings as figures who give, but rather as ones who take. By far the largest portion of the royal eulogies that appear in the stone inscriptions at our seven temples is given over to descriptions of the military conquests of the king, his prowess in battle and the humiliation of his enemies and the capture or destruction of their territories and wealth. Such a king, victorious in battle, seizes what belongs to others. And the booty of war included women. The *meykkīrtti* of the Chola king Kulottunga I that prefaces an eleventh-century inscription from the temple at Tiruvidaimarudur (SII 3.72) describes the king's success in battle:

Before him stood a row of elephants showering jewels, which were presented as tribute by the kings of remote islands encircled by the sea. The noble head of the rebellious king of the South, the Pandya, lay outside Kulottunga's beautiful city, pecked at by birds of prey.... The Pandya king's war elephants, his lost pride, and his boasted valour had been brought low.... The Chola king seized the lands and the troops of elephants that had been abandoned by his enemy, he took hold of throngs of women with beautiful eyes pointed like daggers, he caused the goddess of fame gladly to bring dishonor to his enemies, the great goddess of victory to change sides, and the Pandya king and his father to turn their backs in defeat.

Rajadhiraja I is described, in an eleventh-century inscription from Tiruvisalur (SII 23.345), as seizing the elder sister and the daughter of the Pandya king and cutting off the nose of the enemy king's mother. Kulottunga III – according to the *meykkīrtti* appearing in an early thirteenth-century inscription from Kudumiyamalai (IPS 166) – defeated the Pandya king, “put an end to the war, and caused the Pandya's young wife to become one of his attendants [to enter his *veḷam*]”. The counterclaim of the Pandya king Sundara I 18 years later (in an inscription at the same temple – IPS 290) is that, having destroyed the Chola armies in an incredibly bloody battle, he seized the entire group of the enemy's women. He entered the Chola capital Muṭikoṇṭacōlapuri, surrounded by tall gates carrying flags on their tops, preceded by the chief queen of the defeated Chola and other noble ladies of the palace who carried the eight auspicious objects including the full water pot.

Such claims are part of the imaging of conquest that represents the relationship among kings. They do not tell us about the king's relationship with women. Women, in this context, were loot – precious objects belonging to one's enemy that were taken as prizes of war and whose loss symbolized the enemy's defeat.<sup>18</sup> And it is the moment when women were seized, humiliated or taken possession of that is the focus of attention in the *meykkīrttis* – not the subsequent display, consumption or redistribution by the king of this kind of “wealth”. Notably absent from the *meykkīrttis* – and from the records of gifts that constitute the rest of the substance of the inscriptions – are portrayals of the king as an erotic figure, surrounded by myriad women. There is, of course, the image of the king seated in state softened by the feminine presence of his queens at his side. But these are his legitimate wives, not

women whom he possesses or who exist for his pleasure. Palace women can be seen in the inscriptions, as well – they are, indeed, prominent as temple patrons – but the ways in which they are described indicate that most often these women were “ladies-in-waiting”, attending on the queen as well as the king, rather than concubines or royal courtesans.<sup>19</sup> The Tamil eulogies, as we have seen, depict the king on the battlefield and not in the harem.<sup>20</sup> The only hints of an erotic royal idiom that I have found in the present study appear in verses in praise not of the Cholas or Pandyas but of “chiefs” – the Kadavarayar Kopperuncinkatevar and the Vanakovaraiyar Makataipperumal – inscribed on the walls of the temples at Tiruvannamalai and Kudumiyamalai in the thirteenth century (TAM 208, 212 and 213; ARE 208 of 1941–42). For example, in one of the praise poems for the Vanakovaraiyar chief, a woman awaits his return, anxiously wondering why he has not yet come back, since she thinks she sees signs that the monsoon has arrived, which would put a halt to the season of battle. She is addressed by her friend in the engraved words of the inscription:

O lady, who wears a breast-band! Your lover would not lie to you. What you have seen in the sky was not a cloud but only the smoke that rose from the great mountain when our ruler set fire to the enemy territories.... The sound of the falling of the walls that protected the enemy's town strikes your ears as if it were thunder. But you must not think that the rains are arriving.... O lady, whose shining forehead resembles the crescent moon! If the fetters were removed from the splendid feet of the royal elephant of [your beloved] the Vāṇa king, you would see the splattered brains from the crowned heads of your lord's adversaries, and rock chips from the memorial stones erected for the dead heroes and from the caves where the trembling enemies hide themselves. (TAM 212; ARE 208 of 1941–42)

In this rare depiction of a woman's desire for her royal lover, the mood of eroticism is overpowered by the imagery of war. The medieval stone inscriptions provide a representation of royalty that is very far removed from the “feminized” world of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Nayaka court, “populated by innumerable, crazed, lovesick women, dreaming only of the alluring divine king”(Narayana Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam 1992, 185–89). The Nayaka-period imaging of the activity of the king in terms of generosity, pleasure and consumption (*bhoga*) – including the enjoyment of women – is quite foreign to the royal idioms expressed in the stone inscriptions of early medieval Tamil Nadu.

## The Ritual-Symbolic Field of Discourse

But in the ritual and symbolic discourse of the medieval inscriptions, the erotic element does come into play. Female divinity – and the access of the king to the feminine powers of goddesses – is depicted in the Chola period inscriptions in terms of the union between male and female. Even the king's relationship with human women might be divinized – as we have seen in the case of *meykkīrttis* that portray queens as consort deities, as Umā or Gaṅgā at the side of Śiva or Lakṣmī seated next to Viṣṇu. This kind of representation of queens is found in the *meykkīrttis* of

Kulottunga I and Vikrama Chola, of the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries. It is perhaps significant that this is precisely the period when the donative activity of queens very nearly ceases.

Much more consistently, and insistently, however, the *meykkīrttis* underscore the king's relationship with the goddesses themselves, in images that emphasize the erotic dimension. Although the *meykkīrttis* show queens seated gracefully and affectionately beside the king, there is little evocation of the physical aspect in this relationship or in any relationship that the king has with human women. But goddesses are shown as sexual beings, and the king's connection with these goddesses is constantly reiterated, from the earliest *meykkīrttis* – those of Rajaraja I – to those of the Pandya kings at the end of the thirteenth century. Of Kulottunga I it is said, in an inscription (SII 3.72) at Tiruvidadaimarudur:

Having established his fame, having put on the garland of victory over the Northern region, and having put an end to the promiscuity of the goddess Lakṣmī of the Southern region, and the loneliness of the goddess of the good country whose garment is the Kaveri river, he put on by right the pure royal crown of jewels, while the kings of the earth bore his feet on their heads as their crown.

Here Lakṣmī, as the goddess of fortune – who is often described as being fickle in bestowing, and withdrawing, her boons – is depicted as a woman whose favours are of a sexual nature, to which Kulottunga now lays exclusive claim. He has put a stop to her “commonness” (*potumai*), the quality of the prostitute who is shared among many men.

In another of Kulottunga I's *meykkīrttis*, we see a series of goddesses drawn toward his person, culminating in the physical union of the king with the goddess Lakṣmī:

While the goddess of fame became renowned through him, while the goddess of victory desired him (*virumpu*), while the goddess of the earth became radiant because of him, and while the goddess with the lotus flower (Lakṣmī) united with him (*puṇar*) – Kulottunga Choladeva put on the eminent jewelled crown by right of inheritance. (IPS 125 from Kudumiyamalai, and SII 7.874 and 879 from Kilur)

Similarly, Rajaraja II is said to rule:

while the goddess of fortune, who carries a lotus flower, the goddess of the earth, the goddess of victory, the goddess of learning, who resides on his tongue, and the goddess of fame embrace him with desire (*nayantu pulku*). (IPS 135, 136, and 182 from Kudumiyamalai)

The conceptualization of female divine power as an attribute of male sovereignty that we see in these *meykkīrttis* clearly illustrates the instrumentality of the feminine at a symbolic level. But the image projected is not one in which the king forcibly takes possession of the goddess; rather, she charmingly and graciously bestows herself. Instead of obtaining the powers of goddesses by capture, the king wins them over by pleasing them – even serving them. But his hold on them is not altogether secure. It is always possible that the goddess of victory, the goddess of the earth, the goddess of fame or the goddess of fortune may transfer herself from one man to another, from the defeated ruler to his vanquisher, as we saw above in Kulottunga's *meykkīrtti* from Tiruvidadaimarudur, in which the king is said to have “caused the



goddess of fame gladly to bring dishonor to his enemies [and] the great goddess of victory to change sides” (SII 3.72).

In a later period, for example, in the context of the Vijayanagara court, the king’s relationship to feminine powers was dramatized in court ceremonial, where palace women represented qualities – such as auspiciousness, material well-being and fertility – “necessary to the successful maintenance of the kingdom” and to the status of the king (Price 1990, 595–97). In the Chola period, there is no indication that in the court or the temple, male control over or union with such feminine powers was ritually celebrated using women as the conduits or the embodiments of female divinity. Palace women and temple women certainly were present and active in these environments, but there is nothing to suggest that their roles were associated with the representation of *śakti*, of goddesses or of other kinds of divine feminine power. For instance, the dedication of women to temple service through a ritual of “marriage” to the deity – which might constitute a means by which temple women were identified with a consort goddess – was a practice that was unknown in this period (Orr 2000a, 157, 253–54).

If “coupleness” – the female completion of the masculine – was not of ritual significance on the human plane, it was of considerable symbolic importance for the gods of medieval times, as is demonstrated by the establishment of images and shrines of goddesses. There are a number of references to the consecration and worship of goddesses in the inscriptions of the seven temples; these references are found at all the temples and particularly at Tiruvannamalai and Tiruvidadimarudur. In every case where the goddess can be identified, she is the consort of the male deity enshrined in the temple. The figures involved here are too small to provide more than a suggestion of a chronological pattern that might prevail more generally, but it does appear that references to consort deities are especially characteristic of the second half of the Chola period and that they increase toward the end of the period. Literary, art historical and epigraphical material from other parts of Tamil Nadu reinforces the story suggested by evidence at the seven temples that, beginning in the eleventh century, and reaching a peak in the thirteenth century, goddess shrines were built in the precincts of temples dedicated to Śiva and to Viṣṇu and that Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava theology and ritual came increasingly to stress the image of the male deity as paired with the goddess (Srinivasan 1960; Sivaraman 1973; Stein 1973). When one begins to dig about in the earlier iconographic and architectural history of our seven sites, however, it looks as though these consort goddesses were in some cases coming to dwell where formerly goddesses of a more independent character had held an important position. There is strong evidence, for example, that shrines dedicated to the “seven mothers” (*saptamātrkās*) were established around the main temples of Kilur, Tiruvisalur and Tiruvannamalai and that these shrines date back to the early tenth century, if not before (cf. Balasubrahmanyam 1971, 328; Kaimal 1999 and 2000; L’Hernault 1993; Orr 2005; Schmid 2011). The gradual displacement from worship of such independent female deities by consort goddesses seems to mark a shift, not only in ritual practice but also in the conceptualization of female divinity. The consort of Śiva or of Viṣṇu, regarded as his *śakti* – the force of his creative ability or divine grace – increasingly had the status of a “possession”.

## Conclusions

The giving, taking and possessing referred to in the inscriptions, and the poetic imagery of the *meykkīrttis*, tie together the sociolegal, royal and ritual-symbolic fields, linking the world of the individual donor and the world of gods enshrined in temples at specific sites in the Tamil country. Despite the evocation through the *meykkīrtti* of the ruler in his more or less distant capital, the records seem to emphasize the particularity of each locality. This particularity is expressed not only in terms of the contents of the records, which reveal the specifics of ritual life and social organization at each site, but also through the characteristic form the inscriptions take at each temple – the stylistic conventions employed in their composition, their emphases, their physical appearance and their placement on the temple walls (cf. Orr 2006). Therefore, in considering what these records of gifts have to reveal about women and the gift, it is important to resist seeing the local temple context as an arena in which translocal paradigms – whether normative sociolegal systems or theological discourse or royal idioms – were “worked out” on the ground. This way of understanding the relationship between the local and the translocal invests the translocal paradigms with a substantiality, permanence and priority that they did not in fact possess. More attention needs to be given to the possibility that social, religious and political patterns were being *generated* at the local level. And to understand these processes, there should be more awareness of the ways in which the interactions between local milieux and pan-Indian paradigms have been negotiated through an intermediate level – where there can be found, for example, regional cultures, diverse sectarian traditions and changing courtly constructions.<sup>21</sup> When one considers the ongoing production of legal and religious literature – commentaries and compendia (*nibandhas* and *paddhatis*) – throughout the medieval period and beyond, it is evident that the pan-Indian sociolegal, political and ritual paradigms were continually being restructured (Brunner 1990; Colas 1999; Brick 2015; Goodall 2015). And in this restructuring, there was an ongoing revisioning of the roles and images of women impelled by changes in practice and context – which were always in some sense local.

If it is in the context of the locality that the significance of the gift is most fully realized in medieval South India, then it is important to appreciate how – within this milieu – the three discursive fields that the inscriptions present interacted with one another in their representation of the feminine in relation to the gift. Within the sociolegal field, women acted as *givers* – as temple donors – particularly in the early centuries surveyed here, when queens were far more prominent as patrons than were kings. From the middle of the eleventh century, however, women in general and queens in particular were much less active in this role. Also within the sociolegal field, neither the *meykkīrttis* nor the “business” parts of the inscriptions at the seven temples indicate that women were “given” to be possessed in marriage. At a few other temples in medieval Tamil Nadu, however, there is evidence that women were at times, and increasingly, literally given – as slaves. Within the royal field of discourse, enemy women were depicted as being taken as loot by the king, although

there is little indication that these women were regarded as objects to be possessed or enjoyed. Much more important to the household of the king than captive women or concubines were his legitimate wives, his queens, who were portrayed in *meykkīrttis* of the late eleventh and early twelfth century as consort goddesses. The *meykkīrttis* of the stone inscriptions provide very little in the way of erotic imagery in depicting the king's relationship with human women, but as we pass into the ritual-symbolic discursive field, the king's link with female deities is described in terms of desire and physical union. Here, however, not the king but the goddesses were the active partners. The goddesses were not "taken" by the king, but gave themselves. Meanwhile, in this third discursive field – more allied with the ritual-theological milieu of the temple than the symbolism of the palace – there is the increasing prominence of less autonomous consort goddesses who were in some sense possessed by the male deity.

Within this pattern, there are some elements that were consistent throughout the whole of the early medieval period and some that underwent change. Among the most stable elements are those belonging to the royal field of discourse – particularly as this was embodied in the *meykkīrttis* of the stone inscriptions – which, in turn, drew on idioms from several different sources, both Tamil and pan-Indian.

The more dynamic aspects of the pattern that I have sketched out in this essay relate to the sociolegal and the ritual-symbolic fields. On the one hand, there was a decline in the visibility of women as donors. On the other hand, there was an increase in the prominence of consort goddesses described as objects of worship in the temple, which overlapped with the appearance in *meykkīrttis* of queens depicted as consort goddesses. Within the temple milieu, this seems to mark a displacement of the worship of more independent goddesses, and within the kingly discourse of the *meykkīrttis*, there is not so much a displacement as the awkward juxtaposition of two kinds of royal relationship with feminine divinity – the king's marriage to his queen as consort goddess and his union with the unconstrained and self-sufficient goddess of fortune.

It is tempting to consider that the increasing emphasis on consort goddesses and consorts as goddesses is connected with the declining visibility of human women as agents on the public, political and pragmatic plane. Some hints about the interaction of social change and religious change may perhaps be found in the Āgamas, the sectarian ritual/doctrinal texts, which in many cases show signs of being redacted in South India. It is quite difficult to date these texts, but recent scholarly work indicates that a relative chronology may be constructed, in which the following trends are discernable: an increasing emphasis on "public" temple worship, as opposed to the individual ritual and yogic practices of the initiate; the introduction of "Vedic" ritual observances to replace Tantric elements; and the effort to establish a more "orthodox" framework for eligibility to participate in various roles in temple ritual, in which concerns about the purity of women and lower castes come increasingly into view.<sup>22</sup> These shifts seem to indicate that the Āgamas – and the compendia (*paddhatis*) based on these texts – were adapting to institutional, ritual and social developments and, to some extent, reorienting themselves precisely with reference to those local contexts documented in the stone inscriptions. The theologians and

teachers who transmitted and authored these texts do not figure in the inscriptions, but – given the focus of their texts – they must have been situated within the temple milieu. Here is an arena where it may be possible to discern a parallel development involving, on the one hand, a theology of “coupleness”, in which the supremacy of a central male deity was promoted and goddesses at his shrine increasingly had the status of his consorts, and, on the other hand, an agenda of “orthodoxy”, resulting in a more restrictive approach, limiting women’s access to and influence over temple ritual, including their capacity as donors.

But, as the inscriptions clearly show us, the orthodox norms embodied in scripture did not in fact shape the roles of women in society. Even as their visibility decreased, women were never entirely excluded from participation in temple life, and, indeed, their gifts to the temple may have continued to be abundant well past the time when the inscriptions register a drop in their patronage.<sup>23</sup> The declining representation of women as donors in the inscriptions seems therefore to be the consequence of a series of shifts in the organization of temple authority and economic conditions – but not necessarily social norms or ritual/theological concerns – that would have played out in various ways in different local contexts. While the king imagined himself embracing the goddesses of fortune and earth, and while the deity in his temple had a consort goddess at his side, real women – perhaps because they were *not* viewed as goddesses – participated not as objects but as agents in the complex networks of gift exchange of medieval Tamil Nadu.

## Notes

1. The literature on the gift in India is vast. Among the important secondary sources, some of which include discussions of the gift of a daughter, are Kane (1930–62, II: 110–20, 157–58, 503–18, 837–99), Meyer (1952), Sontheimer (1964), Thapar (1976), Trautmann (1981), Dumont (1983), Strenski (1983), Parry (1986), Raheja (1988), Heim (2004), Orr (2011) and Brick (2015).
2. Lévi-Strauss, in his *Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1969, originally published in French in 1949), analyses the transactions that take place in marriage: “It would then be false to say that one exchanges or gives gifts at the same time that one exchanges or gives women. For the woman herself is nothing other than one of these gifts, the supreme gift among those that can only be obtained in the form of reciprocal gifts. The first stage of our analysis has been intended to bring to light this basic characteristic of the gift, represented by women in primitive society” (65; see also 478–97).
3. Although my focus here is largely on sources that would be classified as “Hindu”, much of what I have to say applies equally to Jain or Buddhist contexts.
4. For permission to consult transcripts of the unpublished inscriptions, I am indebted to the Office of the Director of Epigraphy, Archaeological Survey of India, in Mysore. Information about these seven temples may be found in Balasubrahmanyam (1966, 1971, and 1975); Meister and Dhaky (1983);

Deloche, L'Hernault and Pichard (1990); Heitzman (1997); and Kaimal (1999) and (2000).

5. At Tiruvannamalai, there are 283 inscriptions dating from the eighth through thirteenth centuries, of which six are in Sanskrit and two mixed Sanskrit and Tamil. According to these inscriptions – most of which date from the late tenth, twelfth and especially the thirteenth centuries – 16 % of the gifts to the temple were made by women.
6. At Kilur there are 104 inscriptions, all of which are in Tamil and most of which date from the late tenth and early eleventh centuries. Twenty-one percent of gifts made at this temple were bestowed by women.
7. At Tirukkoyilur there are 60 inscriptions from the period under review, of which two are in Sanskrit and three mixed Sanskrit and Tamil. Most of the inscriptions date from the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and they record that 10 % of the donations to this temple were made by women.
8. At the Siva temple in Udaiyargudi, there are 88 inscriptions, of which four are in Sanskrit and one is mixed Sanskrit and Tamil. Most of these inscriptions date from the late tenth century. Of the gifts to the temple recorded in the inscriptions, 24 % were made by women.
9. At Tiruvudaimarudur, there are 141 inscriptions dating from the ninth through thirteenth centuries – most dating from the tenth and early twelfth centuries – of which all are in Tamil except for one mixed Sanskrit and Tamil inscription. Of the inscriptions recording gifts to the temple, 19 % specify that the donor is female.
10. At Tiruvisalur there are 91 inscriptions, of which one is in Sanskrit and one mixed Sanskrit and Tamil; most of these inscriptions date from the tenth and early eleventh centuries. Of the gifts made to the temple, according to the inscriptions, 35 % were donated by women.
11. There are 115 inscriptions at Kudumiyamalai from the period under review, three of which are in Sanskrit. Most of the inscriptions date from the tenth century, although inscriptions from the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries are also found here. Seventeen percent of the donations made to the temple were made by women.
12. In this essay, I have chosen to focus on temples where women are quite visible in the inscriptions, so these sites are not representative in the extent to which women appear as donors. The figure of 14 % represents the average proportion of donations that were made by women for the whole of the period of the ninth to thirteenth centuries in a study I have carried out based on several thousand inscriptions in six study areas in various parts of Tamil Nadu (Orr 2007b).
13. In some inscriptions of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, a married woman's involvement in the buying and selling of land was mediated by an agent (*mutukan*), but this lack of independence in property transactions is not typical of women's donative activity even in these centuries and is virtually absent in other periods (Orr 2001). Temple women are women identified with reference to a temple, and palace women were part of the retinues of royal figures; neither of these types of women, who were prominent as donors, was identified in the inscriptions in relation to husbands or fathers (Orr 2000a, 2001).

14. On women's charitable giving on behalf of their households as a cross-cultural phenomenon, see Orr (1999). Also see Findly (2001) for discussions of the important female role of almsgiving in the Indian context.
15. In Orr (2001), I have shown that, although connection with a husband is the kinship relationship most commonly mentioned in medieval Tamil inscriptions, the majority of women named are not represented as wives. There is clear evidence in the inscriptions that women retained their natal identities after marriage, which had political as well as economic implications for these women and their families (Orr 2004b; 2007b; 2014; 2016).
16. See, e.g., EI 1.35, EI 6.17B and SII 6.1197. The twelfth-century Kashmiri chronicle *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* (1.151) tells a similar story.
17. This *meykkīrtti* of Kulottunga III is found only in one other place – at the temple of Ceranur (IPS 163), which is, like Kudumiyamalai, in the former Pudukkottai State.
18. The *Kalīṅkattu Paraṇi*, a poem describing the war and the victory of the Chola king Kulottunga, begins with a section in which women of the town are invited to awaken, “open the door” and hear the praise of their king. Among the various kinds of women described are those who apparently were brought as captives from other parts of South India (Shulman 1985, 280; Cox 2016). On the origins of Chola palace women as prizes of war, see Ali (2006).
19. We may compare the tone of the inscriptions with the sexualization of female figures (but not necessarily palace women) in the court literature of the period (Ali 2006, 55–56). Fourteen palace women appear in the inscriptions of the seven temples. Three of these are referred to as *pōkiyar* (from Sanskrit *bhōgi*), and these do seem to be the concubines of local chiefs. The term encountered most frequently – in half of the references – is *pentāṭṭi*, “woman servant” or “attendant”. In the case of palace women connected with the Chola court, in particular, the use of the terms *veḷam* (“palace”) and *parivāram* (“retinue”) is found. That *veḷams* and *parivārams* cannot be considered “harems” is made clear by the fact that men as well as women belonged to them and that they were associated with queens as well as with kings. Of the four palace women mentioned in inscriptions from Tiruvidaimarudur, three were attached to queens. For further discussion, see Orr (2000a, 40–41, 212–13) and Ali (2007).
20. The language of the stone inscriptions, with their Tamil *meykkīrttis*, may be contrasted with what Daud Ali discerns in the Sanskrit *praśastis* of the Chola copper-plate inscriptions – a celebration of the “beauty and splendor of the king's body” and the articulation of a “political erotics” (Ali 2000, 212). This aspect of the Sanskrit eulogies, virtually absent in the Tamil *meykkīrttis*, is expressed in the Tamil poetic genre the *ulā*, in which the royal (or divine) hero passes in procession before his female subjects, who are intoxicated with love for him. Although *ulā* poems were composed in the twelfth century in honour of several Chola kings, this idiom is not transferred into the imagery of royalty that characterizes the Cholas' Tamil *meykkīrtti*. See Shulman (1985, 312–24), Orr (2004a), Ali (2006) and Wentworth (2011) for further discussion of the *ulā* genre.

21. James Heitzman (1997, 202–205, 219–27) has highlighted the importance of “lords” as political actors intermediate between the village level and the sphere of Chola royal authority. Don Davis (2005) demonstrates the function of local or regional corporate groups (e.g., of Brahmins, merchants or artisans) as intermediaries both in Heitzman’s sense and in the sense of bridging the “meta-discourse” of Dharmaśāstra and local and customary law through the framing of legal agreements at the community level. In the context of temple patronage, work by Francis and Schmid (Francis 2009, 2014; Schmid 2014a, b; Francis and Schmid 2016) has illuminated relationships between royal and local contexts, particularly in terms of the roles of “semi-royal” female donors (see also Cane 2016; Orr 2016).
22. Gupta (1983), Surdam (1988), Brunner (1988), Brunner (1990), Colas (1996, 119–29, 140–48, 350–53), Colas (1999) and Goodall (2015). In Orr (1993), I have suggested that there was a change over time in the ways in which the Āgamas represented women, involving the progressive exclusion of women from spiritual and ritual life, evidently on the grounds of impurity or weak moral character, and an increasing distinction between “family women” and women who carried out ritual roles in the temple.
23. As local authorities and temple authorities increasingly took charge of the engraving of records on temple walls, women’s gifts may have been recorded less frequently; or, as a new and more precise vocabulary of ownership of and rights to property developed and was utilized in the inscriptions, women’s access to property and economic autonomy was compromised on an “official” level, but not necessarily in actual practice. See Heitzman (1997, 76–77) for changing formulations of property rights in Chola period inscriptions. In thirteenth-century Chidambaram, for example, we find that Brahman women, who evidently required a male relative to act as their agent (*mutukan*) in property transactions, still had rights to land and rights of inheritance that were very similar to those of their husbands and brothers (Orr 2004b).

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## Chapter 13

# The Gifts of Wisdom: Images of the Feminine in Buddhism and Christianity

Morny Joy

In a word, SHE WHO IS discloses in an elusive female metaphor the mystery of Sophia-God [Wisdom] as sheer, exuberant, relational aliveness in the midst of the history of suffering, inexhaustible source of new being in situations of death and destruction, ground for hope for the whole created universe. (Johnson 1992: 243)

[T]he Great Bliss Queen unites two domains, that of conditioned, compassionate activities and that of the unconditional, the spacelike realm through which she flies. The vast sky, united with her wisdom, is the arena in which her innumerable compassionate activities take place. (Klein 1995: 191–92)

In *She Who Is*, by Elizabeth Johnson, and in *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen: Buddhists, Feminists, and the Art of the Self*, by Anne Carolyn Klein, the figure of wisdom, appreciated in female form, stands predominant. Each figure has its respective applications within its own distinctive religious settings where wisdom provides the benefits of her bounteous gifts. Wisdom is regarded in both contexts as being of ultimate value, as providing the strength and insight necessary to practice and achieve certain characteristics that are of preeminent importance. The fact that, in both cases, it is a female figure that is a representative of such attainments is remarkable. Yet it is only recently that the research scholarship of women has begun to investigate the implications of such traditional associations for their own theory and practice. This essay is but a brief excursus into some of their findings. In such a preliminary survey, I would like to examine the source of these figures of wisdom, the interpretations of these figures by Johnson and Klein – especially the qualities and ideals of compassion and relationship that are thereby honoured and promoted –

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and, finally, the repercussions this has for Western women today interested in either Buddhism or Christianity.<sup>1</sup>

First, a short background sketch of each of the two American authors is in order. Elizabeth Johnson is a Roman Catholic nun and theologian, strongly imbued with the scholastic theology that informed her religion for centuries, yet aware of its needed reform. Her appeal to the figure of Sophia as wisdom is biblically grounded, yet its ramifications, if taken seriously, could lead to a radical rereading of the work of Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1224–74). This involves a new interpretation of the enigmatic tetragram of Exodus 3:14 (YWHY), designating God as “I am who am” – the Yahweh of the Hebrew Bible. This was rendered in Latin by Aquinas as “*qui est*” – “he who is.” Johnson’s thesis is that the feminine form “*quae est*” – “she who is” is just as appropriate and defensible.<sup>2</sup>

Anne Carolyn Klein, who has studied Buddhism since 1979 in India and Nepal, as well as in America, is a professor and practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism. She brings together two strains of this form of Buddhism that have fortuitously coalesced in her own explorations.<sup>3</sup> Theoretically, she looks to the work of Tsongkhapa (1357–1419) of the Geluk order and his commentaries on the *Prajñāpāramitā* (Perfection of Wisdom) literature, which dates originally from approximately the first century C.E.<sup>4</sup> In her own Buddhist practice, she has studied with Tibetan masters who combine this Geluk *sūtra* study with the meditative tantra ritual of the Great Bliss Queen from the Nyingma order, particularly the Great Completeness teachings.<sup>5</sup> The Great Bliss Queen is identified with a woman, Yeshey Tsogyel, the eighth century A.D. consort of Padmasambhava, reputedly one of the most revered teachers and transmitters of Buddhist thought and practice from India to Tibet. The accumulated instructions and conventions associated with Yeshey Tsogyel’s life, even if mythical, eventually coalesced into the figure of the Great Bliss Queen. She is regarded as a supreme manifestation of both compassion and wisdom and, as such, is also regarded as a representation of enlightenment itself.

## Sources

Both of these traditional figures of wisdom have fascinating lineages. Within Christianity, the term “Sophia” appeared both in the *Book of Job* and *Proverbs* but came into prominence as a personified entity in the *Book of Wisdom* and *Ecclesiasticus*, products of the intertestamental period, lasting approximately from the first century B.C. to the third century A.D.<sup>6</sup> Johnson describes her appreciation of this aspect of Sophia:

[A]n explicit way of speaking about the mystery of God in female symbol is the biblical figure of Wisdom. This is the most developed personification of God’s presence and activity in the Hebrew Scriptures, much more acutely limned than Spirit, *torah*, or word.... She pervades the world, both nature and human beings, interacting with them all to lure them along the right path to life. (Johnson 1992: 86–87)

Yet this is not all. In the Christian Bible, Jesus becomes identified with Sophia.<sup>7</sup> As Johnson relates:

First century Christians, in the effort to express the experience of the saving significance of Jesus, ransacked the Jewish religious tradition and the surrounding Hellenistic culture for interpretive elements. Along with Son of God, Son of Man, Messiah, and Logos, the tradition of personified Wisdom was ready to hand. (Johnson 1992: 94)

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has elaborated on this adaptation in her work *In Memory of Her*: “While the Jesus movement, like John, understood Jesus as the messenger and prophet of divine Sophia, the wisdom Christology of the Christian missionary movement sees him as divine Sophia herself” (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983: 189). Perhaps because of its later gnostic appropriations, and its “negative” or heretical associations in the eyes of the orthodox Christian tradition, this feminine notion of Sophia as God was never thoroughly developed (Johnson 1992: 94).<sup>8</sup> The term “logos” became more prominent (Johnson 1992: 97–98).<sup>9</sup> Thus, Sophia has virtually lain dormant in Christian circles until its recent reclamation by women and some male scholars. The qualities that were initially associated with Sophia seemed to have become absorbed by either the Virgin Mary or the Holy Spirit, who have been variously depicted as “the feminine side of God.”<sup>10</sup>

## Wisdom in Buddhism

Klein’s appeal to Yeshey Tsogyel and the Great Bliss Queen within Tibetan Buddhism is not a unique instance of the feminine mode embodying such an ideal. It builds on an earlier precedent. Yeshey Tsogyel’s “wisdom and potential to appear in various guises in accordance with whatever needs arise” (Klein 1995: 17) harks back to the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature of early Māhāyana Buddhism. Here, *Prajñāpāramitā* or the Perfection of Wisdom represents the enlightened state. As Edward Conze details this development in his study of the relevant *sūtras*:

The composition of *Prajñāpāramitā* texts extended over about 1,000 years. Roughly speaking, four phases can be distinguished: 1. The elaboration of a basic text (c. 100 B.C. to 100 A.D.), which constitutes the original impulse; 2. The expansion of that text (c. 100 A.D. to 300); The restatement of the doctrine in 3a. short Sūtras and in 3b. versified Summaries (c. 300 A.D. to 500); 4. The period of Tantric influence and of its absorption into magic (600 A.D. to 1200). (Conze 1978: 1)

The place of origin of the *Prajñāpāramitā* is still somewhat controversial. The south of India is regarded as a probable source, and Nāgārjuna, whose name is identified with its Mādhyamika (middle way) commentaries, is also believed to come from the south of India. But the evidence remains circumstantial, and the debate continues. Nonetheless, the representation of wisdom as female can be discerned in the earliest Mahāyana *sūtras*.

Joanna Macy relates the dynamics of this development in an article, “Perfection of Wisdom: mother of all Buddhas”:



The texts which mark the emergence of Mahayana Buddhism, in the second turning of the Wheel of the Law, honour her whose name they share *Prajñāpāramitā*, the Perfection of Wisdom. They do not present her as a divine being or an immortal essence, for the Dharma, apprehending reality as process, posits no eternal entity. She personifies rather the very insight which perceives the dynamic and interdependent character of reality. She is consequently, the ultimate saving wisdom. As such, she is called the mother of all the Buddhas, their nourisher and teacher. (Macy 1977: 315)

While the actual personification of *Prajñāpāramitā* had occurred by the fourth century A.D. (Conze 1978: 14), it is in Tibet after the eighth century that it is further embellished. D. L. Snellgrove in his study of the Tibetan *Hevajra Tantra* (an eighth-century C.E. text) observes the continuity that occurred though the union of wisdom (*prajñā*) and skilful means (*upaya*). Designated initially as feminine and masculine elements, respectively, both were considered necessary to achieve enlightenment. Wisdom, however, was always allotted the more prominent place:

In this union Wisdom, although unrealizable apart from Means, yet predominates. It has behind it the whole tradition of the Perfection of Wisdom, already actually symbolized in a feminine divinity, the Goddess, *Prajñāpāramitā*. She is therefore the supreme truth of the Void (*śūnyatā*) which is the Perfection of Wisdom. (Snellgrove 1959: 24)

The apprehension of the void or emptiness (*śūnyatā*) as constituting the nature of reality is designated as one the elements of enlightenment. Emptiness is a key concept in the Mādhyamika school of Buddhism. Basically, it refers to the idea that there is no justification for assuming that phenomena – either persons or things – have an essence. As Klein states: “The emptiness of a person or thing means that a particular person or a given thing which exists is empty [*śūnya*] or lacks the reified status that ordinary, non-enlightened people perceive and conceive it to have” (Klein 1985: 83). This is not to say that such phenomena do not exist: only that they do not have any ultimate or independent status such as Western metaphysical systems assume they do. Such a theory of emptiness also undermines the dualistic oppositions in certain forms of Western epistemology that are exemplified in a stark division between subject and object.<sup>11</sup>

The Perfection of Wisdom is just one of the ways this insight can be represented. As Tibetan Buddhism developed, this figure of Wisdom in time became amalgamated with the legend of Yeshey Tsogyel. Ultimately, the Nyingma meditative exercises on wisdom become incorporated with the more conceptual Geluk formulation in a rich fusion that Anne Klein celebrates in her own recommendation of the delights of the Great Bliss Queen (Klein 1995: 151). Klein finds in this coincidence of practice and theory an exemplar of the type of active involvement that is required to initiate the radical change of mind that culminates in enlightenment. In depicting this progress, Klein draws a careful distinction between Buddhism and Christianity:

[W]hereas mainstream Christians do not seek or expect to “evolve” into a Christ, practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism do expect to evolve into their own enlightenment, a state that fully emulates and is entirely equivalent to the experience of the Great Bliss Queen and other enlightened persons. (Klein 1995: 20–21)

Such a comparison brings out one of the principal differences in the professed ideals of the traditions of Buddhism and Christianity. Buddhist practitioners do not just imitate Buddha for, by attaining enlightenment in Māhāyana Buddhism, they acquire the same state as the Buddha did. Yet Klein's reference to the beliefs and practices of mainstream Christians does not take into account the changes that Johnson's (and other contemporary Christian feminists') reformulations of God-talk might effect. Johnson's evocation of wisdom modifies the basically male-oriented Christian model by highlighting elements that, while not altering modes of perception in quite the way that Buddhism encourages, nevertheless have profound implications for how Christ-like behaviour is to be understood. Wisdom is transformative of human conduct in both traditions. But exactly what the different forms of transformation entail now needs to be considered in more detail.

## Wisdom in Christianity

In summarizing her overview of Sophia as "Israel's God in female imagery" (Johnson 1992: 91), Johnson asks:

Who is Sophia? At times she is depicted as a superior type of creature; but at other times she transcends created limitations and exercises divine power in creative and saving deeds. Community of life with her enables individuals to arrive at their destiny, and in the end enables the whole world and its history to be rightly ordered in justice and peace. Little wonder that the interpretation of her origin and meaning within the literature of monotheistic Jewish faith gives rise to diverse scholarly positions. (Johnson 1992: 91)

In this context, Sophia is linked to the right ordering of the world, with the creative and sustaining impulses of individual and community being regarded as primary. There are, however, a plethora of other possible interpretations of the mode of divinity implied that become apparent as Johnson expands her discussion. Perhaps this expansion is due to Johnson's desire to meld Jewish and Christian resources. This becomes markedly evident in Johnson's elaboration of the lineage of wisdom where certain variants of the Judaic description such as mystery, radiance, and goodness intermingle with Christian images of spiritual energy as infusing life, even on a cosmic scale. It is in her portrayal of a liberatory Christ, however, that Johnson is her most theologically innovative:

Christ crucified, the Sophia of God. Here is the transvaluation of values so connected with the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus: divine Sophia is here manifest not in glorious deeds or esoteric doctrine, but in God's solidarity with the one who suffers. While seeming to be weak and defeated, the personal Wisdom of God is in fact the source of life. (Johnson 1992: 95)

Here there seems to be an inversion of dominant worldly values. The hierarchical ordering of the world's values is subverted, and wisdom emerges in solidarity with those who suffer. Nevertheless, Johnson wants to place this description in a perspective where an intimate relationship of God with the world remains of prime

importance. In this way, it is suffering of solidarity, rather than any coerced or imposed personal hardship, that is commended. The Christ who is proclaimed is a liberatory figure whose own suffering can help to heal the world (Johnson 1992: 91).<sup>12</sup>

In this connection, “speech about Holy Wisdom’s suffering with and for the world points to an act of freedom, the freedom of love deliberately and generously shared in accord with her own integrity” (Johnson 1992: 266). This, in turn, “empowers action on behalf of those who are suffering” (Johnson 1992: 268). The corollary of such an involvement is that God is to be found in alliance, not only with those who are oppressed but also with those who labour for justice.

Wisdom’s recommendation for those who aspire to follow her is that of direct intervention in this world. No longer is the injunction one of simple imitations of Christ as gentle caretaker but rather one of strivings to change oppressive systems that do not allow human beings to flourish. This interpretation of Christ belongs to an interpretation of Christ who is not associated with exploitative organizations or impersonal dictates but a mode of in-dwelling that empowers and enlivens. As a result, the predominant ideal of relatedness that Johnson promotes as a facet of wisdom is conceived as a mode of solicitude. This mode of compassion for all is one that strives to maintain a harmony and right order in this world and is identified with justice for all.

## The Changes Wrought by Wisdom

In contrast, Anne Klein’s depiction of the wisdom associated with the Great Bliss Queen depends for its realization on the acceptance of Yeshey Tsogyel as the foremost *dākinī* or female celestial being. Such beings inhabit the limitless space and brilliant light that pertains to the wisdom of enlightenment:

The specific wisdom that defines dakinis is the nondualistic and vibrant knowing of a reality that Geluks call emptiness and that is described in a phrase unique to Nyingma as “beginningless purity” (*ka dag*) or “primordial freedom” (*ye ‘grol*). The dakini moves in space because she fully understands and is active in this great sphere of primordial purity and freedom. (Klein 1995: 159)

The Great Bliss Queen thus represents, or even embodies, the various dimensions of this realm that are indicative of enlightenment:

The dakini who is the Great Bliss Queen ... flies mentally, physically and nonconceptually through a nondualistic expanse. In that calm dimension, she reclaims the distance between subject and object, whereby she displays a realm of universally available experience. One enters into the experience of the dakini through sound and silence, through visual proliferation and empty space, and above all through engaging with the most revered norms of Buddhist culture. (Klein 1995: 192)<sup>13</sup>

The attainment of an identification with the Great Bliss Queen and of the experience of enlightenment is aided specifically by the process of meditation and chanting (of

the Great Completeness ritual) which stills the mind and calms the body.<sup>14</sup> As Klein describes it:

The ritual has three parts. In the brief preliminary section, one takes refuge in the Great Bliss Queen with the fervent wish that through engaging in this practice, one will become, like her, competent to lead others to enlightenment.... The second and major segment ... involves visualizing one's environment and oneself as the surroundings and person of the Great Bliss Queen. In the concluding portion of the enactment, one dedicates the merit of this practice to the benefit of all. (Klein 1985: 89–90)

Klein gives a graphic portrait of the intricate dynamics involved in the ritual:

This vocalization settles the breath and other inner currents ... that affect the mind.... Chanting with others, one is embedded in a social matrix of practitioners and a resonant matrix of sound. The voices of others melt into the experience of self as one kinesthetically experiences the vibration of one's own voice, which one cannot separate from the surrounding sound of others. One is both an individual and part of a unity, and yet not entirely either. (Klein 1995: 175–76)

This concentration cultivates a receptive mind/body state that fosters an awareness of certain key insights. In this process, Yeshey Tsogyel or the Great Bliss Queen is also a representative of the original nature of one's own original (Buddha) mind, which has become distracted and strayed from its innately clear and pure condition:

Yeshey Tsogyel is from the beginning of her ritual regarded as identical with oneself, an expression of the primordial purity and spontaneous excellence of one's own mind, even if the actual experience and nature of that identity is at first obscure. This is why meeting the Great Bliss Queen is in a very specific sense meeting the most primal part of oneself. (Klein 1995: 172)

Perhaps the focal point of variation between the location of Buddhist and Christian forms of wisdom is that ultimately Buddhism does not posit the existence of an absolute deity that utterly transcends humanity.<sup>15</sup> The encounter with the Great Bliss Queen is emblematic of discovering one's own true nature and that of reality itself. The non-dual nature of the realizations involved both ontological and epistemological and then allows the practitioner to function in the world in a way that no longer attempts to dominate according to traditional dichotomies – such as those of mind and body, subject and object.<sup>16</sup> This nondiscursive modality of awareness helps to heal the alienation of beings by the correlative quality of compassion. “Enlightened engagement in the world, like the compassionate activities of the Great Bliss Queen, mean one distinguishes one thing from another without reifying or polarizing this distinction” (Klein 1995: 153). The emphasis is on relieving the generalized sufferings of other beings brought about by ignorance. Nevertheless, there is a resultant change in attitudes and behaviour toward the world. “[O]ne dedicates the merit of this experience to the well-being of all and goes about one's daily activities, remaining as mindful as possible of the primordial purity pervading oneself, others, and one's environment” (Klein 1995: 183).

Buddhism's major emphasis is on changing accumulated patterns of incorrect thought that distort reality and cause suffering. Wisdom brings insight into the

causes of such conduct and can effect a remedy for its damaging consequences. Christianity, by contrast, in Johnson's interpretation of a Sophia-based model, tends toward remaking the social fabric and instituting more just structures that govern personal interactions. These different options of transformation should not be construed as mutually exclusive processes that deal only with mind or matter, respectively. Both Johnson and Klein are concerned to rectify imbalances in the relation of mind and matter/body. For both, neither can function without the other, and the type of non-objectifying consciousness that can foster harmonious relations is lauded by both thinkers. The priority of each thinker, however, would appear to be different. Klein's emphasis is on changing mental formations, while Johnson's contemporary interpretation of *imitatio Christi* looks toward a revision of traditional theology with its patriarchal structures of expression.

The whole question of Buddhist activity in the world is a debated one – for Buddhists are often charged with quietism, even self-absorption, rather than working toward concrete amelioration of the world. Often this has to do with a misapprehension of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) – one of the central concepts of Mahayana Buddhism. To realize the emptiness of all things is part of the experience of enlightenment, but for Klein this in no way endorses abdication from responsibility – it condones involvement in the world, but in a special sense.<sup>17</sup> Specifically, this insight involves no intellectual proofs but a personal perception of the integral emptiness or non-essentiality of all things – *śūnyatā*. An attitude or awareness of the constructed nature of all reality is fostered. This prevents one from being caught up in oppositional dichotomies, be they political, geographical, conceptual, or personal. It also discourages attachment and overidentification with selfish or vested interests in the outcome of one's actions:

The importance of emptiness to the Buddhist tradition is not just that emptiness is considered true, but that understanding it changes the subject in desirable ways, that is, in ways that complement concentration and compassion. This conviction indicates Buddhism's practical orientation, even if its philosophical exuberance sometimes veers in a different direction. (Klein 1995: 137)

Nonetheless, apart from compassion for all sentient beings, Buddhism does not endorse a particular political stance or promote a position of justice, such as a liberatory option for relieving the oppressed, as proposed by Johnson. Instead, the focus is on compassionate acting without preference or desire. At the heart of Buddhism, there is an apolitical promotion of compassion for all creatures. From a Buddhist perspective, Klein is primarily concerned that, without a definite change in one's consciousness, ignorant attempts at reform may simply exacerbate existing deformations.

In contrast to Klein, who does not intend to change Buddhism, Johnson is adamant that one of the cornerstones of Christian doctrine, the Trinity, needs to be revised. While Johnson acknowledges, with due reference to Aquinas, that God is utterly incomprehensible and that all language describing God is analogical (Johnson 1992: 117), she nonetheless affirms the necessity of each age to find new language that is appropriate to help further elucidate the divine. This is because: "As

cultures shift, so too does God talk” (Johnson 1992: 6). To this end, Johnson believes that today, language that reflects women’s experience is needed to interact with traditional patriarchal symbolism, so as to introduce creative alternatives that both honour and evoke “emancipatory discourse” (Johnson 1992: 103). This marks a crucial element of her work that seeks to introduce women into notions of the divine:

If God is not intrinsically male, if women truly are created in the image of God, if being female is an excellence, if what makes women exist as women in all difference is participation in divine being, then there is cogent reason to name toward Sophia-God, “the one who is,” with implicit reference to an antecedent of the grammatically and symbolically feminine gender. (Johnson 1992: 246)

To support this position, Johnson re-envisages the Trinity in the guise of Sophia. As a result, instead of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, which have been described principally with reference to a supreme male model, there is now an alternative one of Mother-Sophia, Jesus-Sophia, and Spirit-Sophia:

Through Holy Wisdom’s approach in incarnation and grace, then, we are enabled to speak about the reality of her own inner relatedness in terms of the livingness of unoriginate Mother, her beloved Child, and the Spirit of their mutual love; or the vitality of Wisdom’s abyss, her personal word and energy; or Sophia’s eternal communion in personal mystery, hidden, uttered, and bestowed; or the relations of Spirit, Wisdom, and Mother in encircling movement. Each are [*sic*] in each, and all in each, and each in all, and all in all, and all are one. (Johnson 1992: 215)

Reversing the traditional hierarchical cast of a downward/descending movement as befits a transcendent interruption within creation, Johnson begins from a this-worldly experiential dimension of Spirit-Sophia, specifically from a feminine perspective. This allows her to focus on the dynamics of a mode of being-in-the-world that is intrinsically relational. Although this latter term has been used in the past to describe the Trinity’s basic modality as a form of co-inhering being, it has basically been confined to abstract speculations. As Johnson relates:

From the Cappadocian theologians through Augustine on up to Aquinas and beyond, the affirmation is made that what constitutes the trinitarian persons is their relationality. Aquinas crystallizes this development with his definition of the persons as “subsistent relations.” This means that the persons are persons precisely as mutual relations and not as anything else apart from their mutual bonding. Relationality is the principle that at once constitutes each trinitarian person as unique and distinguishes one from another. (Johnson 1992: 216)

To reconstitute the Trinity, Johnson introduces attributes from a feminist/female sensibility.<sup>18</sup> Spirit-Sophia can then appear as: “the source of transforming energy among all creatures” (Johnson 1992: 135). Jesus-Sophia can indicate “the way to a reconciliation of opposites and their transformation from enemies into a liberating, unified diversity” (Johnson 1992: 165). Mother-Sophia, however, “points to an intrinsic relatedness between God and the world, a loving relationality that belongs to the very essence of being a mother and never ends” (Johnson 1992: 185).

Johnson’s revision of a triune God in the key of Sophia as inherently relational is a particularly complex figure bearing the weight of many present-day feminist concerns, as well as of an activist orientation drawn from liberation theology.

Sophia-God can no longer be identified with a transcendent power that imposes from on high. It cannot be reconciled with static symbols of being that stultify the impulse of a continual unfolding of creation. Instead, Sophia comes to epitomize the virtues of right relation to the world – “a liberating power of connectedness” (Johnson 270), beyond dualistic estrangements. Sophia resides in an emancipatory and energizing impulse of love – an active force, rather than a passive doctrine. In Johnson’s vision, the wisdom of God thus participates in creation, maintaining both transcendent and immanent features that are somewhat at odds with traditional unilateral monotheistic formulas. Johnson’s contemporary versions of both *imago dei* and *imago Christi* are not intent on justification in accordance with arid theological formulations but are more focused on describing a form of compassionate *phronesis* (practical wisdom) that emanates from God as Sophia. God as Sophia is at work in both the evolving world and in the development of human beings. Such beings, in turn, in their compassion and search for justice, themselves disclose aspects of the divine. In this careful and caring delineation, Johnson has made an intriguing attempt to combine feminist responsiveness, liberation theology, and pantheistic presence.<sup>19</sup>

## Relationship/Connectedness

Klein’s view of relationship explores another direction that does not envisage any major revisions. She takes for granted the central Buddhist concept of *pratītya samutpāda* – the interdependent co-origination of all entities, and its intimate relation to *śūnyatā* – but she does not develop it as the key element in this work.<sup>20</sup> Compassion remains her most important priority. In a sense, it is a given that: “In Tibet the practice of compassion was entered into by those who already considered relationship a powerful principle in their social and metaphysical universe” (Klein 1995: 121). But the compassionate connectedness involved in Klein’s view does tend to differ markedly from the way such relations are presently conceived in Western discussions of ethics. Similarly to Johnson, Klein is highly critical of the traditional egoistic self of individuality that permeates much of contemporary Western culture and its accompanying self-centredness:

The localization of power and authority in individuals that began in the sixteenth century has given rise to a new kind of social ecology, changing the individual’s sense of self; and changing also relationships between individuals and between individuals and their surroundings. In this context, choice becomes more and more a matter of personal responsibility, and more explicitly part of the definition of a person’s unique character. (Klein 1995: 131)

Both Klein and Johnson would appear to have similar responses to this development. The relations of connectedness and compassion that both Johnson and Klein support initiate another form of relationship than that of a single-minded individual’s insistence on their rights, which can interfere with compassionate



relationships.<sup>21</sup> They are both critical of the existent secular position, insofar as it has influenced such developments. At the same time, they each appreciate that certain contemporary women are helping to change such established attitudes. Klein voices her impression of the alteration that is occurring:

Contemporary women in the West, however, are working toward a widely valorized form of connectedness rather than out of it. It is crucial for Western women and men to incorporate individual strength into their understandings of connection, relationships, and the feelings that go with them. Certainly, the polarization of categories like self and other, autonomy and relationship, reason and emotion, voice and silence all contribute to a devaluation of connectedness, making it more difficult (but never impossible) to find a way of compassionate connection that is empowering for all concerned. (Klein 1995: 122)

Acknowledging that misunderstandings of emptiness and the concomitant concept of no-self has led many feminists to shy away from Buddhism as inculcating a dangerous form of self-abnegation, Klein is adamant that “Both Buddhists and feminists would agree that self-abandoning behavior is wasteful, and Buddhists would further emphasize that it fails to get at the ontological root of the issue” (Klein 1995: 131). Nevertheless, Klein also acknowledges that when Buddhists speak of connectedness and relationship, it would be wrong to construe this in strictly personal and emotional terms. This is because the ties that bind relationships in traditional Asian societies are quite different from those in the contemporary West:

Intimate personal exchanges, self-revelation, and analyses of deep feelings are not part of Tibetan friendships or family conversation. Relationships occupy a quite different place in cultures where people are already well “connected” by clan, village, and ideas of cosmos. (Klein 1995: 120)

In this setting, compassion does not necessarily arise from relationships:

Buddhist traditions see compassion primarily as a result of practice, and rarely if ever explain it as a product of one’s relationship with others. Indeed, compassion is often understood as simply radiating out from oneself, regardless of how others behave. This suggests that compassion results less from interpersonal dynamics than from intentional cultivation. (Klein 1995: 117–18)

Mutual interpersonal disclosure is also not a custom in Buddhism. Nevertheless, it is emphasized that other people are vitally important and that one must act with compassion to alleviate another’s suffering – though suffering is never couched in terms that refer to “social, cultural, political and racial circumstances” (Klein 1995: 119). Compassion, however, remains integral to Buddhism within a framework of relationship that is very different from contemporary Western mores. Klein can thus assert:

Compassion for others and thus the persons for whom one has compassion are in the final analysis the causes of enlightenment and Buddhahood. This view is very foreign to mainstream Jewish and Christian traditions, where we find a God who, at least in most theologies, is described as self-created and therefore not dependent on any relation for an inherent Godliness. Insofar as the apex of a secular or religious tradition models self-containment as an ideal, veneration of it undermines relationality. (Klein 1995: 109)

Klein does, however, qualify this observation by stating:

While there are important ways in which the Jewish and Christian God does embody loving relationality, the extent to which God has been interpreted as autonomous has been formative in Western ideas of selfhood. By contrast, a Buddhist's effort to foster a sense of deep connectedness does not go against the grain of any larger context. (Klein 1995: 109)

It is a pity that Klein did not have a chance to read Johnson's book, for it has become obvious that Johnson is also trying to combat the spectre of autonomy and its untoward effects. Unfortunately, Klein addresses mainly the problems concerned with secular and feminist theories of individualization and postmodernism rather than investigate the innovative work of contemporary Christian and Jewish feminist scholars.<sup>22</sup> Johnson's work, as is obvious from the following quotation, is basically as critical as Klein's of much traditional God-talk and its resultant ethics:

Both the being of God, which stands over against the world, and the classical attributes of the divine with their implicit stress on solitariness, superiority, and dominating power-over, speak about holy mystery in an essentially unrelated way on the model of a male self typically constructed over against others. (Johnson 1992: 69)

An exchange between Johnson and Klein, as two "revisionaries," could prove extremely productive. Yet it would seem that it is in their aims regarding how compassionate and caring relationships are viewed, however, rather than their means, that they are similar. They are both seeking how human beings can become more involved in caring and unselfish relationships. It is from this standpoint that Johnson re-envisages the idea of autonomy:

If ... moral autonomy is grounded on relationship, if mutuality is a moral excellence, then language emerges that sees holy mystery as at once essentially free and richly related, the two being not opposites but correlatives. God's activity is discerned in free, mutual relation rather than in divine distance, rule and the search for submission. (Johnson 1992: 69)

As part of this program, Johnson is also interested in changing the thought patterns, speech, and modes of interaction that have conventionally characterized Christian attitudes to women in favour of a new way of constructing this mutual relationality in accordance with wisdom and women. Such an appreciation is essential to her depiction of Sophia-God and its implications of an altered mode of relationship to women themselves:

The wholeness of women's reality is affirmed as created by God and blessed with the identity of being in the divine image and likeness. Practically speaking, this leads to the moral imperative of respect for women, to the responsibility not to deface the living image of God but to promote it through transformative praxis. (Johnson 1992: 71)

Such a new relationality, posed in the key of the female, that entails certain applications is indeed beguiling, but the proposed ideals will need to be very carefully evaluated. It is especially important, given the attribution of characteristics of women and of "feminine" ideals, to consider the debates that have taken place in contemporary gender theory.<sup>23</sup> With this in mind, particularly as these attributes engage with either traditional or innovative representations in both divine and human realms, I will now turn to this aspect of the work of both Johnson and Klein.

## The Woman Question

But what is the relevance of these reclamations of wisdom figures in a “feminine” modality for actual women, specifically in the West? In their linguistic origins, the two words “Sophia” and “*prajñā*” were nouns with a feminine gender, which would indeed seem to be a very tenuous basis on which to build a developed theory of wisdom and women. It is pertinent to note that the concrete embodiment of wisdom in female form, as opposed to simply abstract feminine attributes (deriving from the grammatical gender of the words), was slow to develop and, in Christianity, never actually crystallized. Yet with certain qualifications, both Johnson and Klein believe that there are lessons to be learned from aligning certain “feminine” attributes associated with wisdom to women.

It is not as if Johnson and Klein are unaware of the lack of actual women as prominent representatives in the history of practices regarded as conducive to attaining wisdom in both Buddhism and Christianity. Their observations occasionally converge, yet also differ on several key points.

Johnson acknowledges:

The androcentric character of the standard English translation of God’s name as HE WHO IS is piercingly evident. That character is not accidental but coheres with the androcentric nature of Aquinas’s thought as a whole, expressed most infamously in his assessment of women as deficient males. (Johnson 1992: 242)

This does not prevent her from providing her own “feminist gloss” of this text (already alluded to), but this must be accompanied by a critical phrase of reevaluation of the whole tradition and its misogynistic attitudes and behaviour:

Discourse about holy mystery in the symbols of spirit, sophia and mother provides glimpses of an alternative to dominant patriarchal language about God. Since these symbols as they stand are embedded within a text, a culture, and a tradition that are skewed by sexism, they cannot be taken and used without first passing through the fire of critical feminist principles. Otherwise what ordinarily results is a view of female symbols as “complementary” to those generated by male experience, which in effect results in the female symbols remaining supplementary, subordinate, and stereotyped within a dualistic framework. (Johnson 1992: 103)

Klein also discusses the place of women in Buddhism, with particular reference to Tibet:

The traditional monastic universities – major institutions of religious and political power – have always been closed to women, even while maintaining their equal access to enlightenment. In Geluk oral commentary, it was sometimes indicated that being male was an advantage, though Nyingma teachers occasionally say that women have the advantage in certain tantric practices. However, few Nyingma and no Geluk women are recorded as having achieved significant religious or political power in Tibet. Indeed, wherever hierarchical power structures were emphasized, as they were in Tibet’s monastic order and theocratic political system centred in Lhasa, women were excluded. Women shared with men the unbounded identity between self and cosmos and spiritual potential, but they occupied far narrower boundaries when it came to secular power and authority. (Klein 1995: 50)

In Buddhism, the basic configuration allows for a female symbolic system, whereby encounter with the feminine mode was a necessary step in the process to enlightenment (which a female figure could also represent), but this did not translate into similar respect and treatment of actual women. Women were nonetheless not barred from entering religious life as nuns – though again the circumstance of their acceptance and esteem varied, according to cultural mores:

Positive female imagery and the importance of female deities helped to welcome women into religious life, even if their numbers, status, and economic base were less than those of males. Women who entered the religious life might eventually be identified with female embodiments of enlightenment and recognized as adepts in their own right. (Klein 1995: 55)

But the stories of these women's lives or acknowledgement of their presence and guidance as resources for spiritual accomplishment were not prevalent or easily located in the literature. At the time that Johnson and Klein were writing, the work of both Miranda Shaw (1994) and Tsultrim Allione (1984) has done much to bring these unrecognized aspects of women's lives, both in Tibet and especially in Tantric practices, to contemporary awareness. Since that time, many other volumes, such as those by Biernacki (2007), Diemberger (2007), and Simmer-Brown (2001), have added more details, as well as further questions, to the knowledge of the history and activity of women in this domain.

Klein acknowledges, as does Johnson, that a feminist reinterpretation is both appropriate and necessary for a reevaluation of the phenomenon of wisdom: "It takes a feminist perspective to interpret as significant for women the fact that her female form expresses some of the more profound insights of the Buddhist world view" (Klein 1995: 22).

Yet how does a critical evaluation operate? In relating the embodiment of wisdom as feminine to contemporary feminist concerns, both Johnson and Klein refer to the work of Carol Gilligan (1982) and her thesis of women's more pronounced affiliation with an ethics of care and context rather than an ethics of abstract rules and regulations. Johnson sees Gilligan's advocacy of an appreciation of both of these perspectives as indicating a way beyond the traditional divisions between (personal) compassion and (impersonal) justice. Her vision would thus try to transcend such mutually exclusive impositions that have also denigrated those aspects that have been associated with care and with "women's ways of knowing."

But the heated exchanges that took place concerning Gilligan's work are indicative of the divided voices of women on this issue. There are those who claim that extolling feminine characteristics merely strengthens the ingrained stereotypes that have been inculcated in women for centuries. Others respond that while these attributes may have been culturally determined, and hence relative, yet they are intrinsically worthy of emulation by all and are precisely the values needed to counteract traditional biased masculine ones. The complications of anthropomorphism and reification also loom large when the issue of a divine female form is raised. Is there any difference in wisdom's attributions from the efforts to reclaim qualities from the pagan goddesses, with additional features of sanitized nurturing and harmony to

compensate for their former destructive propensities? There is a tendency on the part of some feminists to idealize their own idiosyncratic self-descriptions, and thus they can appear just as exclusive and antagonistic to other women as were the demeaning masculine structures of old.

On the subject of Sophia in Christianity, women critics have been strong in their questions and reservations. Was the elision of Sophia from Christianity's powerful male syndicate a result of repression, as Joan Engelsman asserts (1979: 119), or simply, as Rosemary Ruether describes, symptomatic of the marginalization of women generally in the Western religious tradition (1983: 14–15)? It is interesting to note, nonetheless, that, from the beginning, Sophia in the Jewish and Christian traditions was never depicted as having any strong attachment to actual women. Sophia appears to have functioned in much the same fashion as did the notion of *shekinah* in the Hebrew scriptures. As Judith Plaskow describes it, her attributes were certainly extolled. Yet in *Standing Again at Sinai*, Plaskow makes an astute observation, which is, I believe, equally pertinent in the case of wisdom:

The same ambiguous or initiatory status that belongs to experimental use of female pronouns and imagery belongs to Shekinah, the female aspect of God in the mystical tradition. It is not surprising that, in seeking female images for God, Jewish feminists turned early on to the one developed image Judaism has to offer – the image of Shekinah as the indwelling presence of God.... The Shekinah was described in a host of images – princess, daughter, queen, mother, matron, moon, sea, faith, wisdom, community of Israel, mother Rachel – many though not all of them, female in fact or association. (Plaskow 1991: 138)

As a result, she warns:

Just as in the Bible, Israel is the bride of God, so the Shekinah is the subordinate bride and consort within God. It is the feminine as the male understands that secondary aspect within himself, not as it is seen or experienced by woman. (Plaskow 1991: 140)

In a similar manner, in her book, *Sexism and God-talk*, Ruether is also suspicious of the reintroduction of feminine modes such as Sophia (Ruether 1983: 58–61). Women could be perceived as adopting (and adapting) what was simply a figment of men's imagination, thereby involving themselves in all sorts of contortions to justify their contrived legitimacy. Schüssler Fiorenza (1985), Wainwright (1994), and Johnson, however, believe that a recuperation of Sophia can be achieved without compromising either the integrity of her tradition or the current interests of women. Yet it would seem that a strong critical feminist hermeneutic needs to be operative. It is fascinating to watch how both Johnson in Christianity and Klein in Buddhism do strive to avoid the pitfalls that could easily undermine their projects.

For Klein, acknowledgement has to be made that Buddhism, despite its proliferation of *dākinīs*, and female *bodhisattvas*, has never been sensitive to issues of gender:

Buddhist discussions of self and selflessness, of mindfulness and compassion, have never taken account of gender as a category of analysis. Who within the 2,500-year-old tradition has analyzed Indo-Tibetan theories and practices connected with emptiness in the context of how they do or do not speak to women? As we have seen, the non-hierarchical Buddhist principles were not applied to the social order of Tibet, and Buddhist texts have little to say about the social position or interpersonal particularities of women. (Klein 1995: 132–33)

As distinct from most Western cultures, however, Buddhism has never had a problem in recognizing the value of relatedness. This relatedness, however, has not been connected in a definite way with women. This leads to a rather singular observation being made by Klein: “Whatever the reasons for women’s lower status in Tibetan culture, it does not, as in the West, seem to arrive from their association with relatedness” (Klein 1995: 109). It would seem, then, that, if the Great Bliss Queen is to be of assistance for contemporary women, from Klein’s perspective, it need not be predominantly concerned with relatedness. Ultimately, Klein is also not sure that it will have anything to do with women’s “feminine” qualities.<sup>24</sup>

Though I believe that the symbolism, philosophy, practices and imagery associated with Yeshey Tsogyel can be resources for twentieth-century Western women, I do not offer her as a “goddess” or “matriarch” or “role model” who automatically affirms or embodies the female character, especially the Western female character. Not only would it be inappropriately essentialist to do so, but I am not at all sure that there is something distinctly and meaningfully “feminine” about her as Westerners, or even Tibetans, understand this term. In any case, the cultural significance she had in Tibet cannot simply be transplanted into another context. (Klein 1995: 22)

Obviously, Klein’s elucidation and recommendation of the practices attached to the Great Bliss Queen have principally to do with the reorganization of perception into non-dual awareness and the cultivation of compassion that accompanies enlightenment. Yet in Buddhism this state can be manifested equally by a male figure, such as Manjushri. If it is not for relationality, or for specific “feminine” characteristics, why then has Klein introduced the Great Bliss Queen as the emblematic figure rather than one of her male counterparts? The answer is not at all clear and perhaps indicates the enigma that lies at the root of many discussions regarding female identity. Female figures from the past or from esoteric sources are in vogue as sources for experiments in new forms of identity. Often, however, their contexts are contaminated. Without falsifying either their past or their transplanted present, what is there of a constructive nature that can be gleaned from such figures by feminists who wish to extend their repertoire? Klein has opted for the fact that the Great Bliss Queen can help contemporary women to experience a way of knowing that does not divide, does not calculate, does not control. In her view, it repudiates the shades of ignorance that have held Western philosophy and theology in thrall to systems that estrange people from one another and from themselves. Wisdom, in this instance, is representative of a system that operates in a contrary manner. “The point of practising the Great Bliss Queen ritual is less to look at her than it is to take a fresh look at one’s own potential. In this way, meeting the Great Bliss Queen is meeting oneself” (Klein 1995: 22).

The Great Bliss Queen symbolizes the potential that one can achieve if one breaks the chains that confine. The concomitant compassion is suggestive of a non-egoistic, non-oppressive way of living and being. But this, in a Buddhist perspective, is not necessarily associated solely with women or the “feminine” – whatever the latter term might signify. Klein’s point in directing her book at Western-educated women seems to provide them with a prototype of a mode that challenges Western arrangements on many levels yet does not get trapped in essentialist/constructivist

impasses or a male/female gender binary that has beset many current Western feminist attempts at reform. The femaleness of the Great Bliss Queen is perhaps incidental in the overall scheme of Buddhist things, yet it serves as a stimulus for Western feminists preoccupied with internal skirmishes to entertain other categories for dealing with questions of difference. But this brings into focus the problems perceived by Buddhist, most especially Western Buddhist, women who are striving to reconcile their awareness of the secondary status allotted to flesh and blood women by Buddhist traditions and their conviction that women do not deserve this subordinate designation. Klein acknowledges that change will undoubtedly come with the growing adoption of Buddhism by Western women, but she is aware that:

The transition will not always be smooth, partly because of differences between the individuality valued in the modern West, and personal independence often demonstrated in Tibetan contexts, and also because of differences between Buddhist philosophical and feminist postmodern perspectives on what it means to know something, and what there is to be known. (Klein 1995: 133)

While it is obvious that Klein concedes that such change will be inevitable, she does not address the specific nature of other changes needed in Buddhism, such as those presented by Rita Gross in her book, *Buddhism after Patriarchy*, especially concerning the composition of the *sangha*, or community, itself (Gross 1993: 257–88).

In contrast to Klein, Johnson's appeal to Sophia unquestioningly takes for granted the fact of women's purchase on relationality. In this sense, as the fact of women's conditioning is not questioned, Johnson could be considered as an essentialist. This is because it is an unproblematic notion of relatedness and women that Johnson uses to recast the Trinity and thus the notion of God in woman's image:

The ontological priority of relation in the idea of the triune God has a powerful affinity with women's ownership of relationality as a way of being in the world. It furthermore challenges classical theism's typical concentration on singleness in God that has been so consistently reprised in a patriarchal sense. Since the persons are constituted by their relationships to each other, each is unintelligible except as connected with the others. (Johnson 1992: 216)

Central to Johnson's position regarding the formulation of God-talk is the emphasis on experience. For Johnson's thesis, this experiential dimension is intimately linked to specifically female modes of being. Such a reification takes for granted the fact that women have a distinct view of reality that is different from men:

In and through women's conversion experience and its many articulations new language about God is arising, one that takes female reality in all its concreteness as a legitimate finite starting point for speaking about the mystery of God. (Johnson 1992: 75)

By adopting this uncritical acceptance of women's experience, without querying its cultural conditions, Johnson does not seem to be troubled that she may well be condoning the practices that have led to women's exclusion from descriptions of modalities of God in the first place. Johnson is more concerned that women's experience be raised to a status of equivalence with the accepted male depictions of divinity. For Johnson, however, this move does not imply that there are separate



male and female forms of the divine. Instead, women's experience provides the basis for a comprehensive portrayal of the divine itself, not just a female aspect of God. So it would appear that Johnson, though she does not elaborate on this, wants to evoke an image of God where both what has been regarded previously as "masculine" and "feminine" aspects will no longer serve simply as models for the separate sexes:

We must be very clear about this. Speech about God in female metaphors does not mean that God has a feminine dimension, revealed by Mary or other women. Nor does the use of male metaphors mean that God has a masculine dimension, revealed by Jesus or other men.... Female imagery by itself points to God as such and has the capacity to represent God not only as nurturing, although certainly that, but as powerful, initiating, creating-redeeming-saving, and victorious over the powers of this world. (Johnson 1992: 54)

Interestingly, what Johnson seems to imply is that women today need no longer be regarded simply as relational beings. This is because, if they are made in the image of God, they can embrace all facets of God's purported identity. They are thus not restricted to nurturing bonds but involved in all the affirmative aspects of existence that are mirrored in the different capacities Johnson has elaborated earlier in her depiction of the threefold nature of God.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, Johnson is adamant that the understanding of God, now conceived according to the feminine dimension of Sophia, must no longer be appreciated simply as the feminine face of God:

If women are created in the image of God, then God can be spoken of in female metaphors in as full and as limited a way as God is imaged in male ones, without talk of feminine dimensions reducing the impact of this imagery. Understanding the Holy Spirit as the feminine dimension of the divine within a patriarchal framework is no solution. Even at its best, it does not liberate. (Johnson 1992: 54)

The maintenance of this position requires an intricate balancing act. Clearly Johnson does not want women constricted to what have been considered feminine values, yet she wants to accentuate the element of relationality as a particular domain of women's influence. Her thesis also seems to include the idea that women's experiences are today undergoing significant changes, and it is such innovative experiences that will have further consequences for alternate appreciations of divinity. But Johnson does not elaborate on what these divergent experiences actually might be, except for connecting them to activities that will promote justice and right order. She understands such developments as responding to the infinite wellsprings of human yearning:

Great images of the divine, as Martin Buber astutely describes, always come into being not simply as a projection of the imagination but as an awakening from the deep abyss of human existence in real encounter with divine power and glory. Images with the capacity to evoke the divine are in some way given in the encounter which at the same time brings persons to birth as persons, as Thou's, in reciprocal relation with the primary Thou. (Johnson 1992: 75)

The implication of invocation would seem to be that as women now come into their own, and as they achieve aspects of autonomy previously unknown to them, new symbols will be created. The problem will be one of maintaining an equilibrium

between this new-found independence and their customary affiliation with relationship. The symbolic expressions of such a complex correlation will be equally problematic. This conundrum is also reflected in Johnson's attempts to depict a version of the Trinity that at once celebrates the transcendence and immanence of God (Johnson 1992: 147).

Perhaps Johnson's dilemma is symptomatic of the situation women find themselves in today – something that Klein also addresses. This is that the old dichotomous intellectual formulas that have informed Western categories of thought are inadequate to express the multiple and coextensive capabilities involved. This could explain why mainstream Western feminist theoretical debates have so often degenerated into irreducible positions between so-called equality and essentialist (or difference) proponents. What Johnson wants to incorporate (as does Klein) is a stance that combines both activist and speculative modes, both emotional and intellectual aspects, both theory and practice, both mind and body. Western philosophical paradigms have difficulty in simultaneously accommodating such constituent parts. Basically, they have been structured oppositionally according to the law of contradiction. In resorting to wisdom as *prajñā* and Sophia, respectively, both Johnson and Klein are seeking sources in their respective traditions that not only allow but also honour the fact that non-dichotomous approaches can coexist.

What then lies at the root of this appeal to wisdom for women? As a relic of past symbolic systems, her range is in many ways limited by the predominantly masculine ambience that generated her initial imagery. As a contemporary prototype of a form of knowing that moves beyond gender restrictions, wisdom provides a prospect that responds creatively to the formerly divisive conflicts between women and men and between women and other women. Yet the invocation of wisdom also displays an ambivalence lurking within the work of both Johnson and Klein. In its contemporary guise, wisdom's knowledge would seem to be neutral in that its symmetry does not favour either side of a binary coupling. Yet both the female symbolic form (Klein) and feminine qualities (Johnson) are stressed as intrinsic components of wisdom's formation. Perhaps what wisdom indicates is the conflicted state that women presently inhabit. There is both pride and strength in the confidence with which they are entering echelons of power and knowledge that were formerly denied to them. But there is also a sense of nostalgia and insecurity initiated by fears of losing what have been their values and identity in the past (however compromised). The natural desire is to combine the strengths of both. Wisdom speaks to these hopes and fears – she is both reassurance and promise. Wisdom would also seem to affirm that women's explorations need not be resolved in ways that prescribe definitive behaviour or qualities as in the past. The mood is expansive, open-ended, enhancing. Wisdom also supplies an antidote to the pessimism that proliferates in denunciations that feminism has subverted the natural order, that violence and disintegration are inevitable, and that a new war of the sexes is underway. While not incorrigibly optimistic, wisdom attests that there have always been aspirations to a notion of an abiding presence that seeks to move beyond the extremes, the polarities, and that exerts a calming and inspiring influence. Wisdom allows for explorations that enhance astute discernment, rather than exacerbate existing tensions.

The ultimate question would seem to be whether this development is simply a utopian fantasy or a reality that can be attained. Feminist thinkers such as Johnson and Klein speak to this vision of a new valorization of both women and attributes that have been considered “feminine” and yet have not always been respected or honoured as have those regarded as male or “masculine.” They support this change from the depths of their own experience, from the heights of their own expectations. In so doing, their aim is to validate and animate other women, and also men, with the conviction that the past, though powerful and pervasive, does not supply the only possible philosophical and religious options available. It could also be that what may appear to be paradoxes today will, in time, evolve into alternative heterogeneous ways of knowing and being. These new forms of existence and expression may no longer find it necessary to compartmentalize and thus employ ontological and epistemological categories that truncate, rather than amplify, the wisdom that comes from strong insightful experience. Yet the understanding of wisdom itself also seems to be undergoing a metamorphosis in this process. The former gendered specificities may eventually be recognized for the anachronistic precedents they were. New forms of describing wisdom may develop that help us to rethink understandings of the gift itself in a gender-free context. Wisdom itself may help to generate ideals of concern that go beyond associating the gift of wisdom with kindness and generosity – be it benign or calculated – or with boundless (even overwhelming) compassion. Notions of the gift itself may well change when it is no longer measured in comparison to either mercenary or sacrificial motives. The difficult voyage to appreciate just what wisdom as a gift may foster, involving genuine mutuality and modes of recognition, devoid of emotional excess or sterile axioms, has been undertaken in recent times in the work of a number of thinkers. These include Luce Irigaray (1996), Hélène Cixous (1991), and Paul Ricoeur (1992). As others join in this exploration, the energizing presence of wisdom, in its abundance and its generosity, may help to furnish the requisite inspiration that encourages all participants to approach notions of god, of wisdom, and of the gift itself in ways that constantly renew themselves and replenish the world they inhabit.

## Notes

1. In his book on the *Prajñāpāramitā Literature* (1978: 2), Edward Conze alludes to close analogies between Buddhist wisdom, *prajñā*, and Mediterranean literature on Sophia (especially in the work of Aristotle). In another article (1975: 160–67), he develops several points of comparison. Such possible mutual influence is not at all farfetched, given the traffic along the Asian trade routes in the formative period of both of these relevant literatures. It is, however, beyond the scope of this paper to pursue such purported links.
2. As Johnson argues: “The original Latin, however, could be rendered differently. It reads, *Ergo hoc nomen, ‘qui est,’ est maxime proprium nomen Dei. Qui est* is a construction composed of a singular pronoun and a singular verb. The

grammatical gender of the pronoun *qui* is masculine to agree with its intended referent *Deus*, the word for God which is also of grammatically masculine gender.... Naming toward God from the perspective of women's dignity, I suggest a feminist gloss on this highly influential text. In English the 'who' of *qui est* is open to inclusive interpretation, and this indicates a way to proceed" (1995), 242.

3. For more biographical information on Klein, see the Prologue in Klein (1994).
4. As Klein notes in a 1985 article: "My analysis of nondualism is based on the Geluk discussion of Prasangika-Mādhyamika. This system of thought, which in Tibet came to be all but universally acclaimed as the highest system of Buddhist philosophy, was first formulated in India in the approximately sixth-century works of Buddhapaṇita and Chandrakīrti on the basis of Nāgārjuna's fourth-century systematization of the Perfection of Wisdom sutras" (1985), 77–78. For Klein's list of teachers in the Geluk order, see Klein (1995), 7.
5. For Klein's list of Nyingma teachers, some of whom also incorporate Geluk sutra commentaries with the Nyingma meditative practices, see Klein (1995), 217n. 42.
6. These latter works appear in the *Apocrypha* of the Roman Catholic Bible but are omitted in the Protestant version. For an excellent coverage of wisdom in the Jewish tradition, see Gerhard von Rad (1972).
7. Perhaps the most exacting study is that undertaken by Elaine Wainwright (1991). In an article, she states: "It is Jesus Sophia who sends out disciples into the marketplace (Matt. 10: 5–15) just as Sophia sent her household companions out as her emissaries (Pro. 9:3). It is not surprising for the reader, therefore, when the works of the Christos (Matt. 11:2) are paralleled with those of Sophia (Matt. 11:19). Wisdom is justified or made righteous by her deeds. Jesus as the one who preaches the right ordering of the universe, its resources and relationships, a key element of Sophia's message of wisdom, also does and lives this righteousness or right ordering. As such he is acclaimed not only as *Christos* but also with the female gestalt, *Sophia*" Wainwright (1994), 70.
8. For gnostic appropriations of Sophia, see PHEME PERKINS (1988) and Deidree Good (1987).
9. See also Burton Mack (1973).
10. See Rosemary Ruether (1977) and Edward Schillebeeckx and Catharina Halkes (1993).
11. For further reading Klein recommends Jeffrey Hopkins, *Meditation on Emptiness* (London: Wisdom Publications, 1983). See also Frederick Streng, *Emptiness: A Study in Religious Meaning* (Nashville: Abingdon 1967) and C.W. Huntingdon (with Geshe Namgyal Wangchen) (1989).
12. Johnson is strongly influenced by liberation theology. See Leonardo Boff (1987).
13. As Klein also notes: "They [*dākinīs*] are known in Tibetan as 'space-journeying ladies,' or 'females who travel through the sky' (*mkh"gro ma*). This term ... is also used in colloquial Tibetan ... to signify those other skyborne creatures,

- birds, whose two wings symbolize the method and wisdom that form a complete path to Buddhahood” Klein (1995), 159. See also Keith Dowman (1984).
14. For further details of the lineage and details of the Great Completeness ritual, see Klein (1995), 72–76.
  15. Klein qualifies this observation: “The Nyingma tradition reveres her as a manifestation of the goddess of sound, Sarasvati, and identifies her with the Bodhisattva Tara and sees her as the emanation, or appearance on ordinary form, of a female Buddha known as the Vajravarahi (‘The Immutable Sow’).... In the ritual centered on her person, however, she is visualized as the Great Bliss Queen and has a very particular appearance that distinguishes her iconographically from Tara, Vajravarahi, and the ‘ordinary’ Tsogyel” (Klein 1985), 79–80.
  16. Klein observes that there are many forms of nondualism in Buddhism. She concentrates on three: ontological nondualism, cognitive nondualism, and evolutionary nondualism. For the development of these understandings, see Klein (1995), 149–58.
  17. As Klein notes: “Thus though Buddhism has sometimes been classified as a religion of rejection, it should at least be emphasized that at least in Tibetan tantra, the practitioner is not rejecting the world but understanding and thus seeing it more clearly. And the overriding purpose for seeking this understanding is to be able to act effectively in the world for the benefit of others” (Klein 1985), 90.
  18. This is a particularly sensitive area. In the last fifteen years, some feminists have found it helpful to make a distinction between sex as a biological given and gender as a cultural acquisition, though more recently this distinction has been challenged. Helpful insights have come from further analyses into their interplay, and, as the work of Moira Gatens (1996) has indicated, such a simplistic dichotomy leads to further problems when it is realized that even sex itself is not uncontaminated by cultural mores. While it is helpful in some settings to use this distinction as a tool of analysis, gender issues today are much more complex (see Orr et al. 2012). Johnson does not differentiate between woman/female/feminist; thus, her analysis needs to be treated on its own terms and its strengths and weaknesses assessed. Klein’s work tries to avoid the problem of gender as it pertains to ideals of “feminine types,” but the whole point of her discussion is how the constructivist/essentialist debate can be circumvented. Again, this argument has to be evaluated on its merits.
  19. For a more detailed discussion of this topic, see Johnson (1992, 230–33).
  20. Klein’s exposition of this doctrine of interdependent co-arising (as *pratītya samutpāda* is sometimes translated) occurs in *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen*, 127–28: “Minds, persons, and all other phenomena exist in dependence as a series of moments and on their own parts. To understand this is to understand persons or things as ‘dependent arisings’ and as existing conventionally, meaning dependently, instead of inherently, meaning utterly independently of causes, parts, or naming. Everything that exists, the entire world and the beings in it, is considered a dependent arising.” Klein also depicts how emptiness is intimately related to *pratītya samutpāda*: “In Middle Way (*Mādhyamika*) Buddhist

- philosophy, emptiness is considered entirely compatible with dependent arising; indeed, emptiness is said to be what makes dependent arising possible" (Klein 1995, 134).
21. Referring to the work of Elizabeth Fox-Genovese (1991), Klein observes that "Western women continue to understand rights as deriving from an individual's innate being.... Women also typically adopt the language of individual rights in making a feminist case" (Klein 1995), 32.
  22. To name a few who are concerned with formulating a new understanding of God with regard to women, see: Judith Plaskow (1991), Pamela Anderson (1997), Grace Jantzen (1999), and Janet Martin Soskice (2007).
  23. See a relevant article by Morny Joy (2006).
  24. Simmer Brown also expresses such reservations (2002: 7; 39–42).
  25. From this perspective, Johnson cannot be viewed as a simplistic essentialist, although her views of women and relationship are in need of a more critical evaluation. This is because there still remains a problem that Johnson does not address. This is the fact that the traditional "masculine" mode of dealing with God remains as it has always been. Much feminist criticism, e.g., Ruether (1983), has been directed at these formulations. Does Johnson mean to imply that these abstractions will remain a legitimate way of describing God, as women's ways of a more relational nature are given equal prominence and acceptability?

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